INSIDE: WHAT'S INSIDE THOSE BOOTS?

Montana Outdoors

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS | $3.50

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2015

MADE in MONTANA

How do we manufacture so much waterfowl?

IN THIS ISSUE:

WE LUCKED OUT

LONGING FOR AN ELK BUGLE

BLOCK MANAGEMENT HUNTING TIPS

REGULATIONS BOOKLETS: PACKED WITH OPPORTUNITIES

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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***MONTANA OUTDOORS* STAFF**
Tom Dickson, Editor
Luke Duran, Art Director
Debbie Sternberg, Circulation Manager

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Montana Outdoors

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2015

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SHOULDERING RESPONSIBILITY
Across the state, FWP game wardens face both danger and drudgery as they work to enforce Montana's game laws. See how three of them do it on page 10. Photo by Allen Morris Jones.

FRONT COVER
Montana is the Lower 48's number three waterfowl producer. So why aren't there more duck hunters here? See page 18. Photo by Matt Ludin.

Says it all

Your magazine just keeps getting better. The cover story you ran on the Rocky Mountain Front by David Cronenwett ("Where Prairie Meets Mountain," July-August) says it all as a geological, ecological, spiritual approach to this incredibly special place. Isn't this why we live here? Thanks so much for the good work.

Diana Longdon
Helena

WHERE PRAIRIE MEETS MOUNTAIN

The origins, beauty, grandeur, and wonder of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front.

Barely worth noting?

I just read in the July-August issue of your magazine that confirmed livestock losses by wolves in 2014 were 35 cattle, six sheep, and one horse (Outdoors Report). I think *Montana Outdoors* does a disservice to predators by focusing on just those numbers. Without context, we can't judge how serious such depredations are for the livestock industry. In reality, wolf depredation, even considering that not all losses are confirmed, is almost nonexistent. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Montana producers lost 90,000 cattle or calves to all causes in 2011 (I could not find more recent numbers) and 43,000 sheep and lambs in 2012 to all causes—or 133,000 animals total. The 35 cattle and six sheep killed by wolves last year was just 0.03 percent of the 133,000—barely worth noting. I acknowledge that not all wolf depredations are found, and that the presence of wolves could reduce livestock weight gains for some producers. But producers who have a confirmed loss to wolves are reimbursed by the state—which is more than they get if an animal dies due to a birthing complication. Justifying the trapping and shooting of wolves because of livestock losses lacks credibility when you realize just how few domestic animals are lost annually to these large carnivores.

> **"In reality, wolf depredation, even considering that not all losses are confirmed, is almost nonexistent."**

George Wuerthner
Livingston

Well, released eventually

That was an awesome underwater shot of a Bighorn River brown trout on the cover of your May-June issue. But the caption says that the fish was being released. Not likely, with the line still coming out of its mouth and the fly still attached to its jaw.

Justin Dalby
Livingston

Delicious memories

Your article on Lake Koocanusa ("Straddling the Border," July-August) brought back many fond memories. When we lived in Kalispell in the 1990s, my dad would take us kids to Koocanusa on the weekends and we'd cruise around the lake in his boat, fishing for kokanee. My sister and I would compete to see who could catch the most fish. On Sunday nights my parents would invite the neighbors over for grilled kokanee with Dad's homemade barbecue sauce. A real treat, and my mouth waters just thinking about it.

Kyle Johnson
Spokane, WA

Even more to thank

Thanks for the update on the Bitterroot River and Painted Rocks Reservoir in your May-June 2015 issue ("Enough for All"). The benefit of Painted Rocks' stored water has been significant for the fisheries, floaters, and economy along the heavily appropriated Bitterroot River. Understandably, limited space prevented the author from fully describing the intensive negotiations, shuttle diplomacy, and funding that made it all possible. Key players in the project not mentioned in your article were Marshall Bloom, a longtime local Trout Unlimited member who recruited Laura Ziemer and Stan Bradshaw of TU's Montana Water Project to rally state and federal agencies and find funding. They engaged the Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program to pony up $400,000 for future reservoir maintenance that secured 10,000 acre-feet of water per year. Chris Hunter, the FWP Fisheries Division administrator at the time, and his capable staff negotiated with Jack Stults and Kevin Smith of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation to craft a deal that rewatered the parched Bitterroot. Those creative thinkers and funders worked to restore flows to the river, boosting trout populations and supplying a reliable economic boon to the valley. In a time and state where government and conservation are too often disparaged, the Painted Rocks deal is a prime example of how collaboration among irrigators, government agencies, and conservation groups can solve difficult problems in creative ways that benefit agriculture, anglers, and communities.

Patrick Byorth
Director, Trout Unlimited's
Montana Water Project
Bozeman

Correction

In the essay on the Rocky Mountain Front ("Where Prairie Meets Mountain," July-August), we incorrectly implied that the Sun River Game Preserve, established in 1913, eventually became the Sun River Wildlife Management Area. According to Brent Lonner, FWP wildlife biologist in Fairfield, the preserve, which sits within the Bob Marshall Wilderness, still exists. "The Sun River Wildlife Management Area—or Sun River Game Range or Elk Pasture, as many people still call it—was established in 1948 along the foothills of the Rocky Mountain Front with the primary intent of providing key winter range habitat for the Sun River elk herd," he writes. "Both were put in place for wildlife conservation, but for different objectives." ■

Crispy Pheasant Breasts in Gin Cream

By Tom Dickson | Preparation time: 10 minutes | Cooking time: 6 to 8 minutes | Serves 4

A few weeks ago when a friend came over for dinner, he noticed the open door of my liquor cabinet and commented on the rows of bottles inside. "Wow. Is that all yours?" he asked with a look of concern.

My liquor cabinet is well stocked. But before anyone signs me up for a 12-step program, know that, as I explained to my friend, most of those bottles contain liquids used for cooking, not drinking. Though I'll down a whiskey and water before dinner or a small glass of Benedictine before bed, most of my Cointreau, Scotch, brandy, Calvados, vermouth, port, sherry, and gin is poured into a frying pan, not a shot glass.

I make Whiskey Chocolate Bundt Cake, Duck Breasts in Bourbon Maple Gravy, Mountain Grouse in Apple Brandy, Venison Sausage in Port Wine Sauce, Pheasant Poached in Tequila, and Beer-Batter Fried Fish, to name several favorite recipes. Readers may recognize a few from past issues of *Montana Outdoors*. Alcoholic beverages work especially well with game's earthy flavors.

The point of adding liquor to dishes is the flavor, not the alcohol. A splash of sherry or port before serving can add freshness to a dish. Fortified wines and liquors add hints of fragrant, fermented fruits. Gin, vodka, and other spirits—made by distilling grains, botanicals, and native plants such as juniper—accentuate with aromatic undertones. The sugar in some alcoholic beverages balances the acid in tomato-based dishes and the sour or bitter taste of others. Alcohol also releases flavors in some foods that otherwise stay dormant, and interacts with other elements to create entirely new tastes on the tongue. My liquor cabinet is simply an extension of my spice and herb rack.

Most of the alcohol burns off when added to long-cooking stews and braises. In sautés and other quickly prepared dishes, most of it remains in the dish. But don't worry about becoming tipsy. The accompanying Crispy Pheasant Breasts in Gin Cream recipe—based on one from Jonathan Miles's *The Wild Chef*—uses a quarter cup of gin. About half of that cooks off in the pan, leaving just 1.5 teaspoons of gin—diluted by cream—per serving.

If anyone staggers home after consuming this rich, delicious dish, they'll have to blame the cream and potatoes, not the booze.

—Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

INGREDIENTS

- 1.5 pounds boneless pheasant, ruffed grouse, or blue grouse breasts. Chicken breasts would work, too.
- ½ c. flour
- Salt and pepper
- 1 egg
- 1 T. water
- 2 T. olive oil
- 1 T. finely chopped shallots
- ¼ c. gin
- 1 c. heavy cream
- 3 T. chopped fresh thyme (or 1 T. dried)
- 1 t. freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 T. chopped parsley

DIRECTIONS

Place the flour in a shallow dish. Season with salt and pepper. Break the egg into another shallow dish, add water, and whisk.

Heat the oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Dip the breast meat in the egg mixture then into the seasoned flour to coat. Cook in hot oil for about 1 minute per side or until the coating begins to brown and crisp. Remove to a plate.

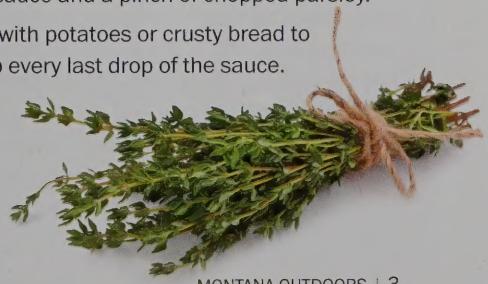
Reduce heat to low, then add the shallots. Stir constantly for 1 minute, then add the gin. Simmer for 1 minute. Add the cream and most, but not all, of the thyme, bring to a simmer, then return the breasts to the skillet. Cover.

After 2 minutes, cut into the thickest part of the breasts and remove while still pink in the center.

Let the cream mixture simmer another 1 minute until it thickens. Add the remaining thyme and the lemon juice. Salt and pepper to taste.

Ladle a spoonful of sauce onto each plate, set the breasts on top, then top the breasts with more sauce and a pinch of chopped parsley.

Serve with potatoes or crusty bread to sop up every last drop of the sauce.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Handbooks of hunting opportunities

Sometimes it's helpful to look at things from a different perspective. For instance, that guy annoyingly honking his horn behind you on the road could, in fact, be someone trying to let you know that you've left your cell phone on the roof of your vehicle.

So it is with Montana's hunting regulations. At a glance, these official Fish and Wildlife Commission–established game seasons, limits, and other laws and regulations list all the things a hunter *can't* do. But they can also be viewed as a list of all the things a hunter *can* do.

Think of them as handbooks of hunting opportunities.

That's because the regulations booklets contain every hunting option in this state—including some incredible ones. For instance, look through the deer, elk, and antelope regs for hunting districts that allow hunting for "either-sex" elk by permit only. That indicates the areas hold some very big bulls. Bulls grow large antlers when allowed to live longer, and the reduced hunting pressure created by permit drawings lets some elk reach trophy size.

What are the odds of drawing a permit for those areas? That information is in the booklet, too, on the pages showing statistics for the previous year's drawings. There you can find which hunting districts (HD) have the most hunters applying compared to the number of permits available—like HD339, HD380, HD410, and HD632. That indicates the quality of elk hunting available for lucky hunters who draw those tags.

Similarly, the moose, sheep, and goat regulations contain essential information for anyone hoping to draw those coveted tags, including hunting district boundaries and success rates of previous applicants.

The regulations booklets get a bad rap for being too thick and complicated, and rightly so. But compared to what? I went saltwater fishing in British Columbia last year, and the regulations were as complex as anything Montana issues for big game hunting. Most states, especially those offering abundant elk opportunities, have regulations as complicated as ours.

In large part, that's because we are managing elk and deer at a smaller and smaller scale to account for widely varying habitats, populations, and landowner tolerances in different parts of the state. In some cases, we're trying to grow deer and elk herds that have been hurt by severe weather or overharvest. There, we make harvest regulations more conservative. In other areas, we're trying to shrink deer and elk herds that have outgrown available habitat or become undue nuisances to landowners. In those cases, we liberalize regulations to increase harvest, which lowers herd size to previously established objectives.

By customizing harvest regulations for each hunting district, which requires constant population monitoring and hunter harvest analysis, we've been able to steadily grow Montana's herds. Just look at our elk population—from 40,000 in 1990 to between 150,000 and 160,000 today. That increase is in large part reflected in the thick booklets of regulations that hunters carry around in their trucks and backpacks each fall.

FWP could make the booklets thinner. The easiest way would be to apply blanket seasons and harvest restrictions statewide. When we did that back in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, the regulations booklet was a lot smaller than it is now. But taking that approach today would likely mean imposing conservative regulations statewide, with much shorter seasons, so that we didn't end up putting too much harvest pressure on hunting districts where deer and elk herds were struggling. And those conservative regulations would mean that areas that have too many deer and elk wouldn't receive the hunting pressure they needed, resulting in even more depredation for landowners.

Simpler regulations would in many cases mean far fewer opportunities for hunters and far more problems for landowners.

Another thing to know is that the Fish and Wildlife Commission scrutinizes any proposed new hunting law or rule before it ends up in the regulations booklets. Most regulations that our biologists and game wardens propose get the green light, but sometimes commission members, appointed to represent the Montana public, modify proposals to make them simpler. If not for the commission, the regulations would be even more complex.

The hunting regulations can also be viewed as a list of all the things a hunter *can* do in Montana.

We'd all like to see hunting regulations simplified and made easier to understand. FWP and others are working on that. But if hunters viewed the booklets as handbooks of hunting opportunities, and understood that many of those regulations are meant to squeeze as much hunting opportunity out of big game herds as possible while still conserving populations and managing depredation, maybe the regulations publications would seem a little less bulky.

—M. Jeff Hagener, *Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director*

MONTANA FWP

JESSE LEE YARNADO

FISHING FRONTMAN

DAVE HAGENGRUBER
Angler Education Program Coordinator, Helena

Here I'm putting on a Fishes of Montana clinic at the department's Montana WILD Education Center in Helena. Statewide and throughout the year, FWP staff and volunteers put on dozens of these clinics, open to kids and adults. The biggest aquatic education program we have is called Hooked on Fishing, aimed mostly at fourth- and fifth-graders. I was hired by the department almost 20 years ago to launch the program. Today it's in nearly 250 classrooms across Montana, each with six to ten different lessons throughout the year, taught by teachers, fisheries biologists, game wardens, and volunteers. The lessons include topics such as water quality, fish identification, insect identification, and fish dissection, and provide at least one opportunity for students to fish, either in open water or through the ice. Some teachers even incorporate math and writing lessons into the programs. Students use math and science to run population estimates, or they keep journals on their scientific investigations. We want Hooked on Fishing to inform all kids about the fish where they live and how their local aquatic systems work. When these kids become adults, they'll be the ones making decisions on how the state's lakes, rivers, and fisheries should be managed. We want this program to get them hooked on enjoying and valuing those resources at an early age.

Photographer **ROLAND TAYLOR** has had a soft spot for Great Falls ever since moving there in 1972. "It's a great little rural city, but you don't see many nice photos of it," he says. Late one evening while along the banks of the Missouri River, which runs through town, Taylor noticed a picturesque sunset forming in the clouds over the river just below the Central Avenue Bridge. "The scene, with the clear water and underwater stones in the foreground, reminded me of similar shots I've taken of Lake Bowman in Glacier National Park," Taylor says. "The photo causes a double-take. It's not some wilderness but instead an urban setting. Having the city sandwiched in the photo between sky and water emphasizes Great Falls' position in the natural landscape. I hope when people see this shot they realize that the city has this incredible, beautiful resource flowing right through its heart." ■

7.4

Millions of acres enrolled in Montana's popular Block Management hunter access program last year

Drake and hen, uh, *redheads*?

What duck is that?

One of the toughest parts of duck hunting is figuring out what species you're shooting at. Ducks fly fast and are often backlit by the sun, making identification difficult. But being able to discern species—and sex—of ducks on the wing is important. For instance, killing three hen mallards in one day is a federal game law offense.

Making duck ID a lot easier is a free guide available at all FWP regional offices called *Waterfowl Identification in the Central Flyway* (it's handy for the Pacific Flyway, too). The guide shows various species in flight and illustrates key features of duck wings—the best way to positively ID ducks in the hand.

A new ethics program urges hunters to do the right thing.

ETHICS

How to hunt (when no one's watching)

There's a right way to hunt, like shooting game only at a distance within your ability, not wounding animals whenever possible, and respecting private property.

Then there's the wrong way, like shooting at animals out of effective killing range, shooting into a herd or flock, and littering on private land.

A new project called Hunt Right is helping hunters understand the difference between right and wrong hunting behavior.

The effort is spearheaded by the FWP Region 3 (southwestern Montana) Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC). "This is about showing proper respect for our treasured wildlife and landowner partners and helping hunters make the right choices when afield," says CAC member Dennis Nelson. "The future of hunting depends on social acceptance, and we believe better ethical behavior will improve the public's perception of and support for hunters and hunting."

The group aims to take its message statewide this fall and asks hunters and hunting groups to support the effort. "The success of Hunt Right depends on the entire Montana hunting community," says Nelson.

To donate to the ethics awareness program, visit huntrightmt.org or the Montana Outdoor Legacy Foundation website at mtoutdoorlegacy.org. ■

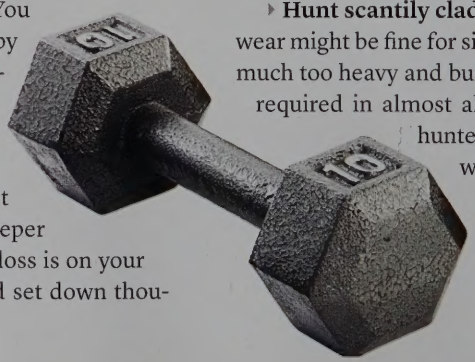
HUNTING

Drop 10 Pounds by the Deer/Elk Opener

Jack Ballard, an outdoor writer and photographer in Red Lodge who has hunted for big game across North America, thinks most hunters carry far more weight than necessary. "I don't mean the hunters themselves are overweight, though that's true in some cases, but that they haul around too much gear and clothing that's heavier than it needs to be," he says.

Over years of trial and error, Ballard has come up with tips to help hunters shed 10 pounds from loads they carry into the mountains or prairies.

- **Boot the big boots:** "You can save 2 or more pounds by wearing waterproof but uninsulated hiking boots rather than traditional all-leather mountain hunting boots. Add a pair of lightweight Gore-Tex gaiters for deeper snow. Because that weight loss is on your feet, which you pick up and set down thousands of times each day of hunting, that's the single most important improvement you can make to your hunting ensemble."
- **Don't duplicate gear:** "Field saws, GPS units, cell phones, rope, and insect repellent are among the items you can share among two or more hunters in a group."
- **Lighten up the shooting outfit:** "You can drop 2 or more pounds by using a lighter scope, a nylon rather than leather sling, a lighter rifle, and carrying no more than ten cartridges."
- **Hunt scantily clad:** "Much of what hunters wear might be fine for sitting in a tree stand but is much too heavy and bulky for the active hunting required in almost all of Montana. I suggest hunters walk themselves warm while carrying a lightweight down sweater or jacket in their backpack to put on when they stop and start to cool down." ■



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CARTOON ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE MORAN; DONALD M. JONES; MONTANA FWP; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; USFWS; STEVE DEHLENSCHLAGER

CONSERVATION

Popular recreation and habitat program faces uncertain future

What do a swimming pool in Hamilton, a fishing access site on the Yellowstone River, a skateboard park in Anaconda, a veteran's memorial in Butte, a disc golf course in Bozeman, a ballpark in Glasgow, a conservation easement near Whitefish, and a national forest land acquisition of 8,000 acres near the Smith River have in common?

All were paid for in part by the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).

Congress established the LWCF in 1964 to provide quality outdoor recreational opportunities and conserve the land and water supporting those opportunities. Since then, the program has funded more than 50,000 projects nationwide, making it the most important and far-reaching land, water, and recreation program in the country.

LWCF directs a portion of federal royalties from offshore oil drilling—not tax dollars—to conservation, public access, and recreation priorities across the United States. The fund receives about 10 percent of total federal offshore oil royalties.

According to a new report on the fund's economic and community benefits, the LWCF invested $237.6 million in Montana from 2005 to 2014. Since its inception, the fund has helped purchase or improve 800 recreational sites across the state.

Keeping Montana the Last Best Place was released by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Plum Creek Timber, The Nature Conservancy, the Montana League of Cities and Towns, and others. The report states that, despite the LWCF's many benefits to Montana and other states, appropriations have been erratic. The fund receives $900 million in revenues each year, yet the money can't be spent unless Congress appropriates it. Depending on the mood of congressional leaders, the LWCF receives anywhere from a lot of money to nothing at all. In recent years, LWCF funding nationwide has been less than half the amount authorized for the fund. "Congress siphons royalty money to other parts of the federal budget," the report states.

Congress must reauthorize the LWCF by September 2015—a highly uncertain outcome.

Congress must reauthorize the LWCF by September 2015—a highly uncertain outcome.

Montana U.S. Senators Jon Tester and Steve Daines support reauthorizing the act. Senator Tester has also co-sponsored a bill to make the act permanent and remove the need for continual reauthorization. Several bills introduced over the years to fully fund the LWCF have failed, despite the legislations' widespread support among conservation organizations, outdoor recreation groups, and local communities nationwide.

In western Montana, the LWCF has helped communities keep their timberlands in production while protecting public access and habitat for elk and other wildlife. "Our interest is getting these properties into public ownership because of all the benefits they provide," says Blake Henning, vice president of lands and conservation for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

Recently, the LWCF was instrumental in purchasing 8,000 acres of private land near Tenderfoot Creek from conservation-minded landowners and adding it to the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

Typical LWCF grants to Montana towns and cities include $30,000 to Polson to improve a ballpark, $71,000 to the Colstrip Park District for a new park pavilion, and $21,000 to Twin Bridges to spruce up its city park.

LWCF has also helped pay for conservation easements to preserve Montana ranchland. Dupuyer rancher Karl Rappold says the program has been essential for maintaining a ranch that has been in his family since the 1880s. "LWCF has been an important tool for me to do what's right for the land and my family. Thanks to the LWCF, my son now operates the ranch with me, and we've conserved open space for future generations of cowboys and critters," he says.

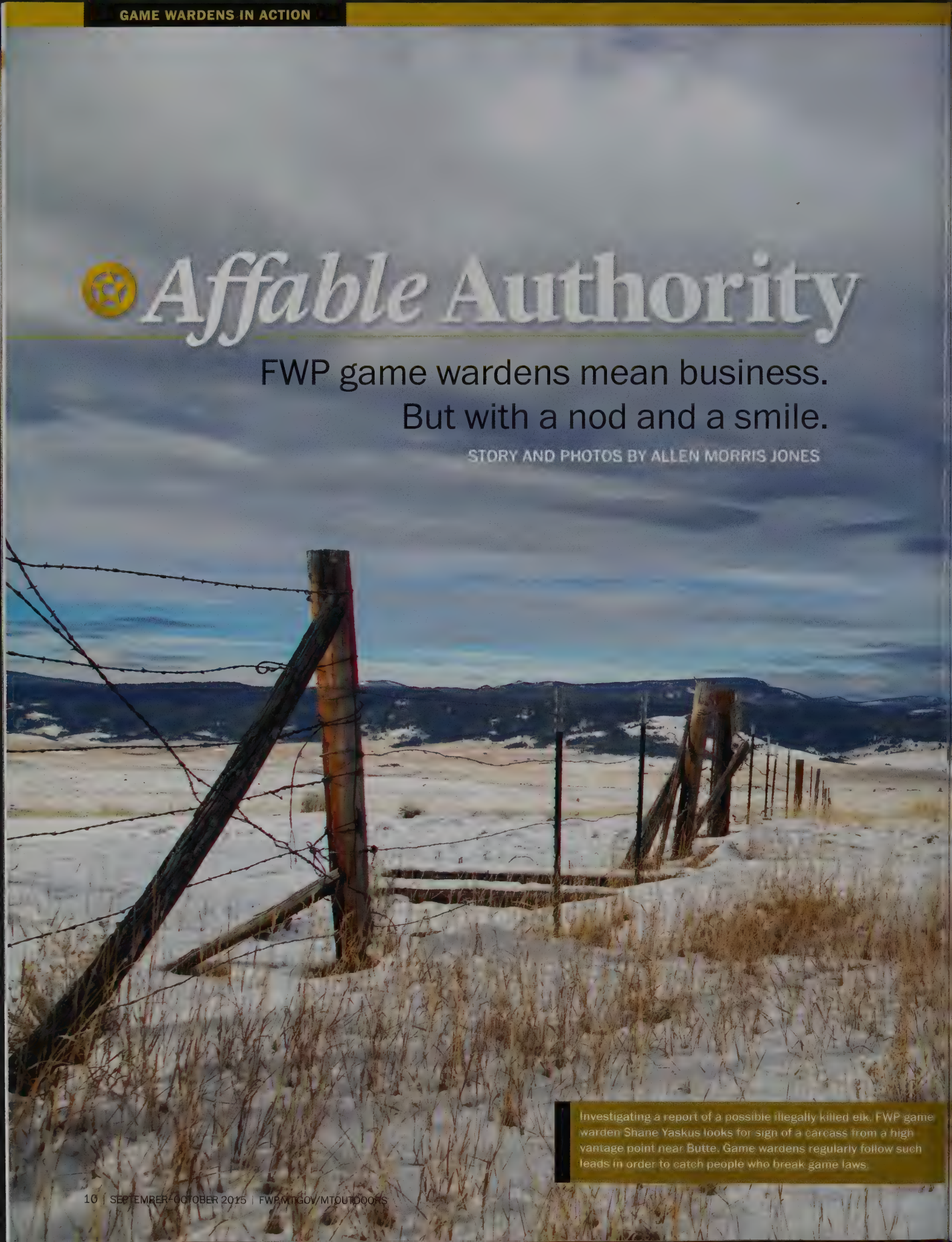
Read *Keeping Montana the Last Best Place* at rmef.org/Portals/0/Documents/15LWCF001_Report.pdf. ■

The LWCF uses federal offshore oil-drilling royalties to fund community facilities like skateboard parks and acquire new public lands such as this parcel added to the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

Affable Authority

FWP game wardens mean business. But with a nod and a smile.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES



Investigating a report of a possible illegally killed elk, FWP game warden Shane Yaskus looks for sign of a carcass from a high vantage point near Butte. Game wardens regularly follow such leads in order to catch people who break game laws.

FWP 1764

Among law enforcement officers, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks game wardens are a species apart. They're peace officers, sure, but they're also hunters, trappers, and anglers. Writing tickets, confiscating game animals, they belong to the same community as the violators themselves.

Watching a warden walk up the gravel bar toward you for a license check, you think, maybe we know some of the same people, maybe we have the same interests in the outdoors. They're also the one branch of law enforcement regularly asked to approach people who are visibly armed. Think about that for a second. You're the game warden, you're on horseback in the Pintlers or the Highwoods, miles from the nearest security camera, and here's a poacher standing over his elk, rifle in hand.

"Seriously, dude? You want to confiscate my bull?"

"Afraid so."

Consider the guts it takes to have that conversation.

Game wardens are also major stewards of our fish and wildlife resources. Elk, trout, walleye, mule deer—for the resource to survive in good condition, it must be managed, which includes regulated harvest. For the regulations to have teeth, they need to be enforced. Wardens are the half-hidden springs that help keep the clockwork ticking. I've never paid much attention to who they are and what they do. I've had my license checked a dozen times in 20-some years, but I've never really stopped to have a conversation, to find out who they are. Until recently.

Warden Shane Yaskus, based out of Butte, is a burly guy, prematurely bald, big the way bouncers are big. Affable, confident in the manner of not having anything left to prove. I met him in the parking lot of the FWP office in Butte. A warmish day in November. "Go ahead and climb on in. Just throw your stuff in the back there."

"Thanks."

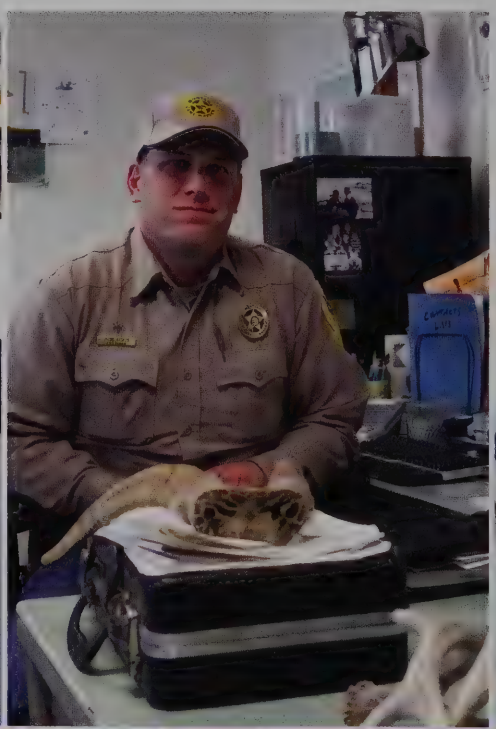
"It's good you're kind of a small guy. Not a lot of room in here."

Over the next six months, I imposed on the goodwill of three FWP wardens, riding along during typical days at their work. Three seasons, three wardens, three different approaches. But there were commonalities as well. Their state-issued trucks, for instance, were all tricked out much the same: utility box in the bed, along with a shovel and winch, and usually a laptop computer on a dashboard swivel. Yaskus said, "I thought we'd start out with a TIP-MONT call south of town. A landowner said he watched two guys gut an elk over by a neighbor's barn."

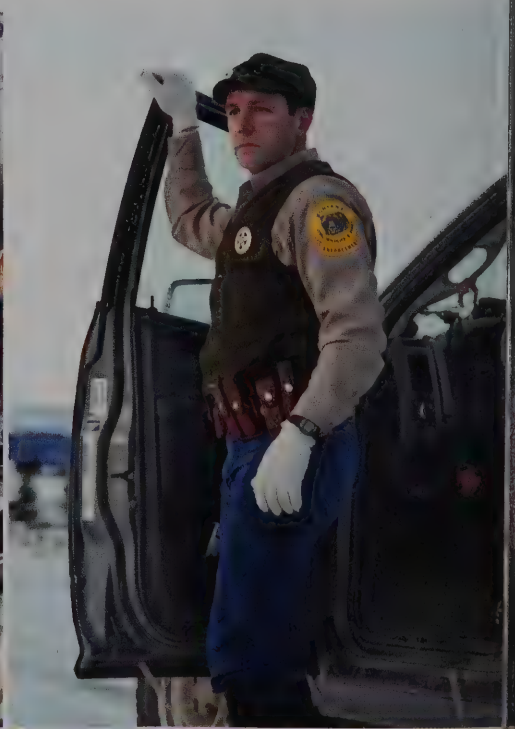
"Sounds good."

In his late 30s, the father of four, Yaskus grew up in Stevensville, went to college in Utah, then to the Montana Law Enforcement Academy in Helena. "FWP had a hire going on while I was at the academy, so I got to graduate already wearing the Wranglers," he said (the jeans being standard FWP game warden attire). Given the salary of a game warden these days, Yaskus supplements his

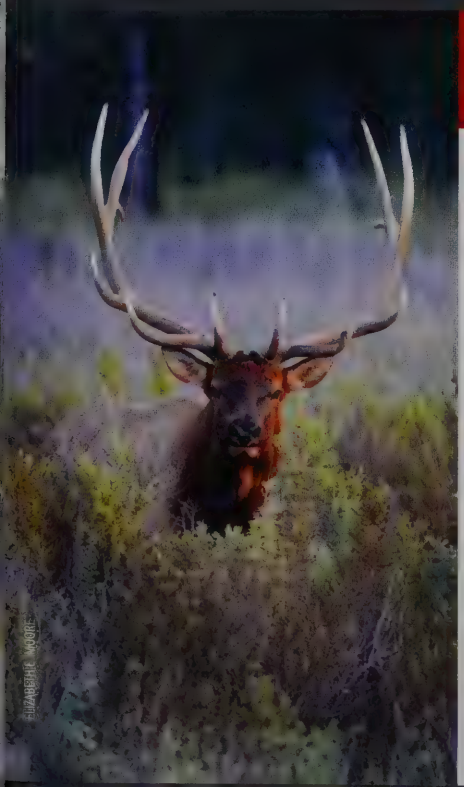
Brett Logan Great Falls



Shane Yaskus Butte



Joe Kambic Deer Lodge



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Shane Yaskus checks a hunter's license at an impromtu game check station he set up in the Boulder Mountains north of Butte.

income with contracting work. "We built that house down there. The one with the darker siding."

Hunting season is, of course, a busy time for wardens, and this TIP-MONT call was just one of a number of similar reports Yaskus had been investigating. He had a general idea of where the elk carcass had been, but not the exact spot. As he drove, he checked the GPS on his dash. Then he pulled over and opened his laptop.

"Cadastral mapping. You can search landowners by name. It's kind of invaluable in this type of situation."

A few minutes later, Yaskus was talking to the owners of the barn. An elderly woman in her bathrobe, towel around her hair, stood in the doorway of a manufactured home. She said, "You know who you should really be investigating? Our neighbor up there with the hounds. Those hounds bark at all hours."

Yaskus was sympathetic but noncommittal. "So you didn't hear anything last night? No shots?"

"Nuh-uh. But my husband's up in the shop. You should talk to him."

Yaskus ended up passing the time with the husband, forearms on the back of the truck, small talk transitioning to business.

"I suppose I should probably take a look in your barn. Do you mind?"

It was another commonality I would find across the three wardens. Affable authority. He was a pal, but with an asterisk. Over the course of the day, I watched Yaskus set up an impromptu game check station ("I like to eat my lunch with the windows rolled down. Listen for shots.") and conduct an interview with a college kid who had shot an elk on a neighbor's property without permission ("You go on Facebook, there's a photo of him and his girlfriend with the elk." Yaskus grinned. "You wouldn't believe some of the things people put on Facebook.") Through it all he maintained that same sense of cordiality. Enjoying his work.

FULLY-STAFFED, 75 game wardens operate in Montana (currently four are female), overseen by 11 sergeants and seven district captains. District Two warden Joe Kambic is based out of Deer Lodge. In January, I waited in the early morning at a gas station off I-90. Ten minutes before dawn, the familiar FWP truck pulled up next to me. Kambic said, "You can put your bag in the back there. Just make room if you need to."

For Kambic, January usually means mountain lion hunting, trapping, and damage control hunts. But today was going to be all about ice fishing. Driving out of town, he offered me a ziplock bag of goose jerky. "Would you like a piece?"

"Thanks." I chewed, and chewed. "It's uh, yeah, it's…good."

"I love hunting ducks and geese, but I lie awake nights figuring out ways to choke them down. Especially the thighs. I mean, how do you make goose thighs edible?"

"You're supposed to eat the thighs?"

"That's the law, yeah. As a game warden, I try to do it. But they can be chewy."

"My whole life, I never knew you had to eat the thighs."

Kambic, I discovered, was a bit of a philosopher about his job. A pragmatist. "If you followed the letter of the law," he said, "you could pretty much always find somebody doing something wrong. But the way I see it, if you don't write people up for violations that don't mean anything, maybe they'll feel like they can come back to you later and report a violation that does mean something."

Like Yaskus, Kambic kept a pad for making notes. He had a cell phone, GPS. What he didn't have, conspicuously, was a computer. "I don't know, man. My style is, I'll do my computer work at my desk. It's a tool, but when I'm in the truck, I'm dealing with people. It's boots on the ground. Last Thursday I got stuck in a snowbank and had to dig myself out. The computer wouldn't have helped me much in that situation."

On Georgetown Lake, Kambic walked from ice house to ice house, crunching through old snow. He had his spiel, his banter. Shaking a corner of a tent: "Game warden. Everybody decent in there?" The Super Bowl was just a few weeks away, and football was in the air. He told a 12-year-old boy, handing his license back to him, "Afraid I am going to have to fine you for that Cowboys sweatshirt, though. That's a jailable offense right there."

Allen Morris Jones is a writer, photographer, and editor in Bozeman.

"A lot of my strategy is just to be as visible as possible."

Above: Joe Kambic talks to ice anglers at Georgetown Lake. With an average work area of 2,000 square miles, wardens need to cover a lot of ground each year. Below Brett Logan files a report in his Great Falls office.

The boy held his license, smiling uncertainly. Over the course of five hours, Kambic checked nearly 100 ice anglers. Of these, only four failed to produce their licenses.

One fisherman said, accepting the warning ticket, "I know what you could do to me, so I appreciate this. I truly do."

Driving away from Georgetown, Kambic said, "A lot of my strategy is just to be as visible as possible. If somebody catches that bull trout in the summer and they'd really like to keep it, maybe they'll think, 'I've seen the game warden in here a couple of times on his horse. I'd better put it back.' Well, that's a win for us."

Something about our culture, we want to see the glamour in law enforcement. Primetime TV is filled with interrogation rooms and search warrants, car chases and shootouts. But the essential aspect of law enforcement, it has always seemed to me, is the furthest thing from glamorous. It has something to do with the notion of public service, with working on behalf of the greater good. A lot of paperwork, a lot of time on the phone.

When I met with game warden Brett Logan, he was putting off having to investigate a long-dead mule deer doe that had washed up on a riverbank.

Tall and lanky, Logan grew up in Driggs, Idaho, the son of a ranch manager. He went to Carroll College in Helena, playing defensive end until an injury made him reassess his priorities. I met him at his office in the FWP regional headquarters in Great Falls.

"Hey, I got a dead deer for us to investigate, but give me a few minutes. I need to make a phone call first."

Warden sergeant Dave Holland looked in and introduced himself. "So what's your article about?"

"A day in the life of three different game wardens. Maybe something about the technology. How it's changing the job."

"Things are changing. The trunked radio system. Has anybody talked to you about our radios?" He showed me what looked like a standard walkie-talkie. "Used to be, our radios were analog; you needed line of sight to the repeaters. But this is closer to a cell phone. We can talk to Lewistown on this thing if we need to."

Logan came back. "Dispatch is sending TIP-MONT calls to our e-mail now, and I guess they're going to be putting the Automated Licensing System on our phones. That'll be handy."

The new technology, he said, would let him and the other wardens immediately check to see if anglers or hunters caught without a fishing or hunting license actually did buy it. Many claim they forgot it at home.

"But now," he took a deep breath, "we still gotta go dig through a dead deer."

At Morony Dam on the Missouri, Logan produced a pair of blue latex gloves and a skinning knife, and walked down a long flight of concrete stairs to the water. A mule deer doe, hairless after a winter under the ice, lay on the shore. "*Oof.* Man, can you smell that?"

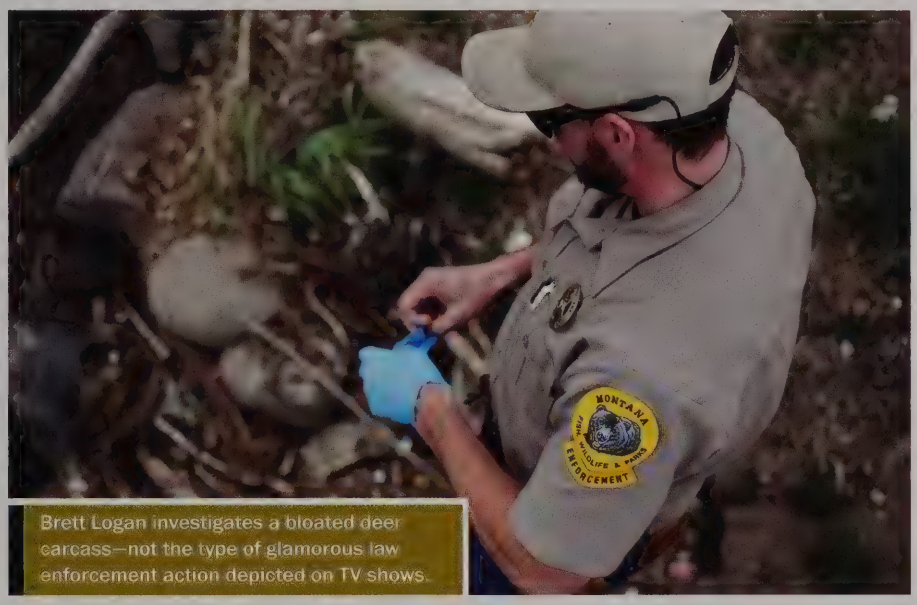
"You'll notice I'm standing upwind."

"Yeah, I noticed that." He twisted a front leg around. "I don't see any bullet holes. What happens, they'll fall through the ice in the winter, then sink to the bottom. Weather turns warm, they float to the surface." A few minutes later, "Yeah, looks like she fell through the ice. Case solved."

I didn't see much glamour during my day with Logan. No drama. Rather, I watched him talk for 15 minutes with a fisherman below Morony Dam (they shared photos on cell phones: "Pike on Tiber. Thirty pounds. Can you believe it?"). I listened as he politely let the chattiest citizens keep rambling on. And noticed how he lifted his fingers off the wheel to any number of passing vehicles. A guy overseeing the community of sportsmen, but a part of it as well.

Like a number of us who grew up hunting and fishing, I admit that I've sometimes had ambivalent notions about game wardens. The fish and game laws are so (necessarily) complex that simply by pulling on your waders, or shrugging into an orange vest, it can feel like you're already on the verge of breaking some kind of law. In that context, I'm not sure what I had hoped to take away from my ride-alongs. Maybe I was perversely hoping to find aspects of the job that I could object to. Maybe I wanted to see these guys swagger, show some bravado. Instead, and common to all three wardens, I found judiciousness, and humor, and sympathy, and a deep regard for the resource. I saw a studied respect for the law, and discretion enough to know when to apply it. Dammit, I didn't expect to like these guys so much.

Yaskus, Kambic, Logan. Computers in trucks and next-generation radios, GPS units, and cadastral mapping. The tools may be changing, but they are still hanging off the timeless armature of good people doing earnest work. *Boots on the ground*, I thought. That's what the job's about. The boots, and the quality of the folks who fill those boots.



Brett Logan investigates a bloated deer carcass—not the type of glamorous law enforcement action depicted on TV shows.

It's September, when the sweet corn's ripe and the tomatoes are ready to can and the kids wear shoes to play outside. We've gone swimming in the river for the last time.

Somewhere, the aspens are yellow and the bulls are screaming. Somewhere. Not here on our five acres. And we're not elk hunting this September. In November Josh will hunt cows, with a muzzleloader, but that's it.

If we could hear just one bugle. One bugle to remind us the elk are still out there. One bugle to bring us what the second week in September used to mean: horses and guns and trails and late nights and early mornings and fires and clear rivers and wilderness and elk.

One bugle to remember.

We've got a two-year-old and a one-year-old and debts and a new business in a new state. Diapers and car seats. A minivan. We listen to screams all right, but they're not from elk. And they don't stop when September's over. Josh goes hunting a few days here and there. He didn't get an elk last year. (New area, brand-new baby: not a good combination.) We now live hours from our old hunting camp in Montana's Scapegoat Wilderness. And while our children are the lights of our lives and we'll love them forever, come September we're thinking about the bulls.

Like Josh was, tonight. A neighbor told us about a place with bulls, a non-archery unit up in the mountains. First we said we'd go, then we decided not to. But Josh's brothers, Dan and Caleb, were going, so that decided us: We'd go and take the babies, Asher and Claire. We drove, and the babies cried because it was their bedtime and I got carsick because I was trying to read and I wondered if it was worth it. We got there and got out, and we stood and saw nothing but mountains and dark. Caleb bugled. I was still extracting Claire from her car seat and she was crying so I almost missed it.

A bugle. Josh and the boys didn't hear it, so I ran and told them and they wouldn't believe me. It was probably just an Angus cow, they said. There's always cows up here grazing on leased national forest land. Caleb

KEN ARCHER

Just One Bugle

We listen to screams all right, but they're not from elk.

By Amy Engbretson

bugled again, and this time no one said anything about an Angus or any other kind of cow. This was a bull elk in the rut, and he was coming our way.

We walked down the trail and crouched there, the wind in our faces, the stars shining down, and listened as Caleb bugled him in. Asher cried a little, frightened at the dark and the scary sounds and our excited whispering. It's an elk bugling, Josh kept telling him, and he fell silent, not a word or a sound for 45 minutes. (This is a two-year-old who normally can't stop talking—about anything and everything, at any time of day.) After calling back and forth, back and forth—the sound an invisible string pulling the bull closer and closer—he was just 20 yards away, thrashing and bugling and spoiling for a fight. He was right there, and it seemed impossible that we couldn't see movement, an antler, a swaying in the trees. But it was too dark. We heard him licking his lips and whipping the brush with his antlers, stomping over logs, and the sound of antler on wood. He was 20 yards away in the trees, but he wasn't coming out. Asher started whispering happily about the elk, the night, the bugles. Once he forgot to whisper, and Caleb quickly bugled to cover up the sound. But the bull either didn't hear or didn't care.

I stood there with my daughter, next to my husband and son, and I thought of a sunny grassy hill where we slept once while hunting, of the creek that ran through our elk camp. I thought of hiking all those miles, of packing up camp, of the yellow aspens and the burned hillsides, of the smell of dry grass and the smell of soup made over a fire and the smell of an elk. I thought of sitting under a tree in the rain, watching for rainbows and elk, and the feeling of getting away, of solitude and silence under the great sky and the stars and a silver moon. Of the mule strings and moose in the creek and following the trail home beside the river. Of the bears we saw and the things we talked about and the elk we shot. (I use "we" loosely. I have never shot an elk and probably never will, but I love hunting with my husband, I love elk, and I love elk country.)

I looked at Claire, my small daughter, my friend. It's a bull elk, Claire, I whispered. He's bugling; can you hear him? She looked at me with wide, surprised eyes and didn't make a sound. She tried to peer into the darkness and, seeing nothing, fell asleep, with Caleb bugling right behind her and the bull screaming in front. We waited and then there was another bull, a deeper, chuckling bugle. He came in and, suspicious, circled and smelled us and was off.

We got cold and cramped and it was time to leave. Caleb bugled one more time, and the bull, moving off, bugled back. One more time.

It was back to the diapers. There's a time for everything, and in this time there's not a lot of room for elk hunting in our lives, Josh's and mine. Someday, one that will come sooner than I'll be expecting, these babies will be teens holding rifles and shooting their first elk. I want to be there, silently cheering. I want to listen to their dad teaching them about hunting elk, about respecting life, about blood and ethics. I want to watch them stagger under the weight of meat, watch them learn how to keep going when they want to quit, watch them stand facing the wind, listening for the faraway bugle of an elk.

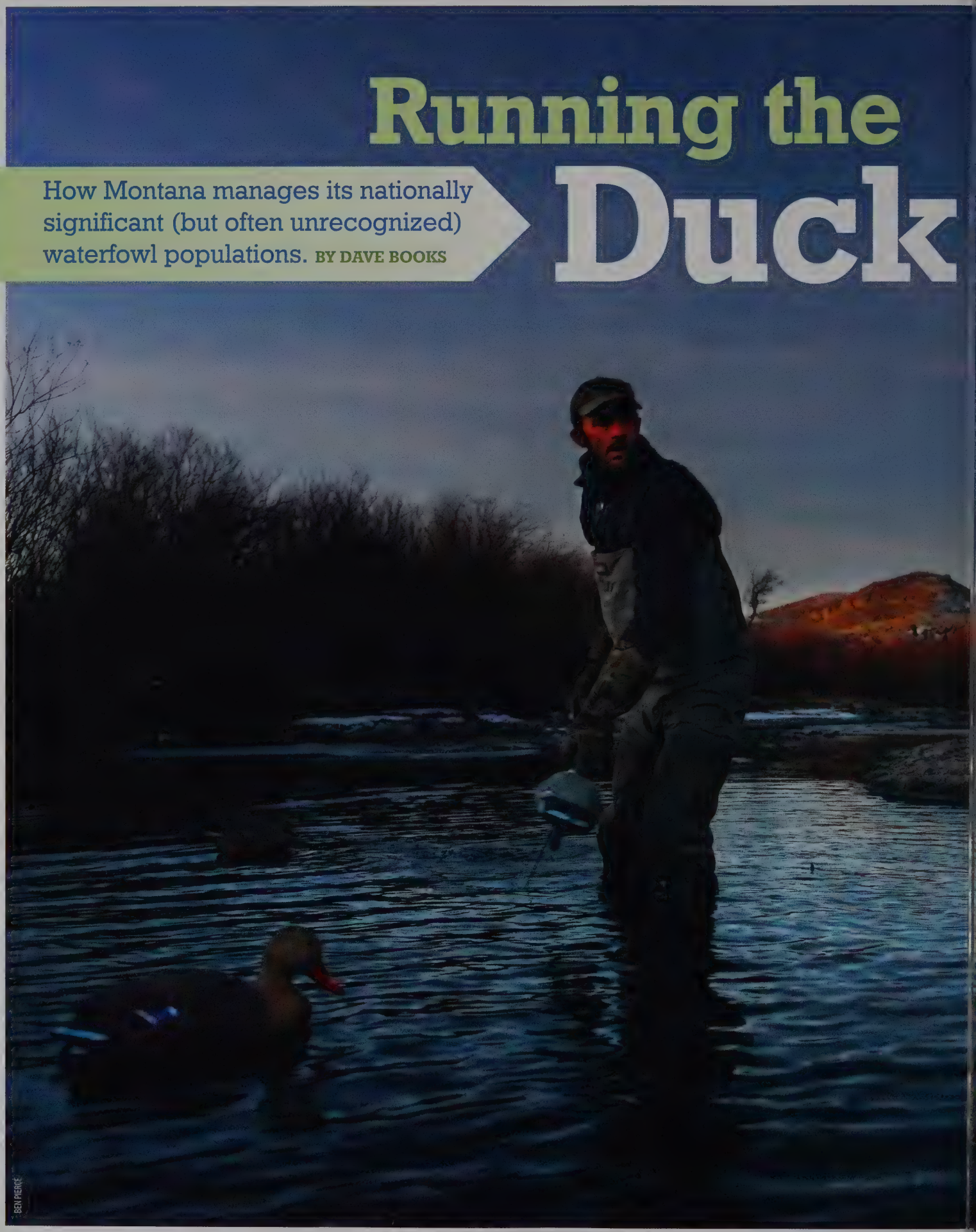
It's a blue September day and I'm folding laundry and canning tomatoes.

Somewhere, the bulls are screaming.

Amy Engbretson is a writer in Grangeville, Idaho. This essay originally appeared in Bugle.

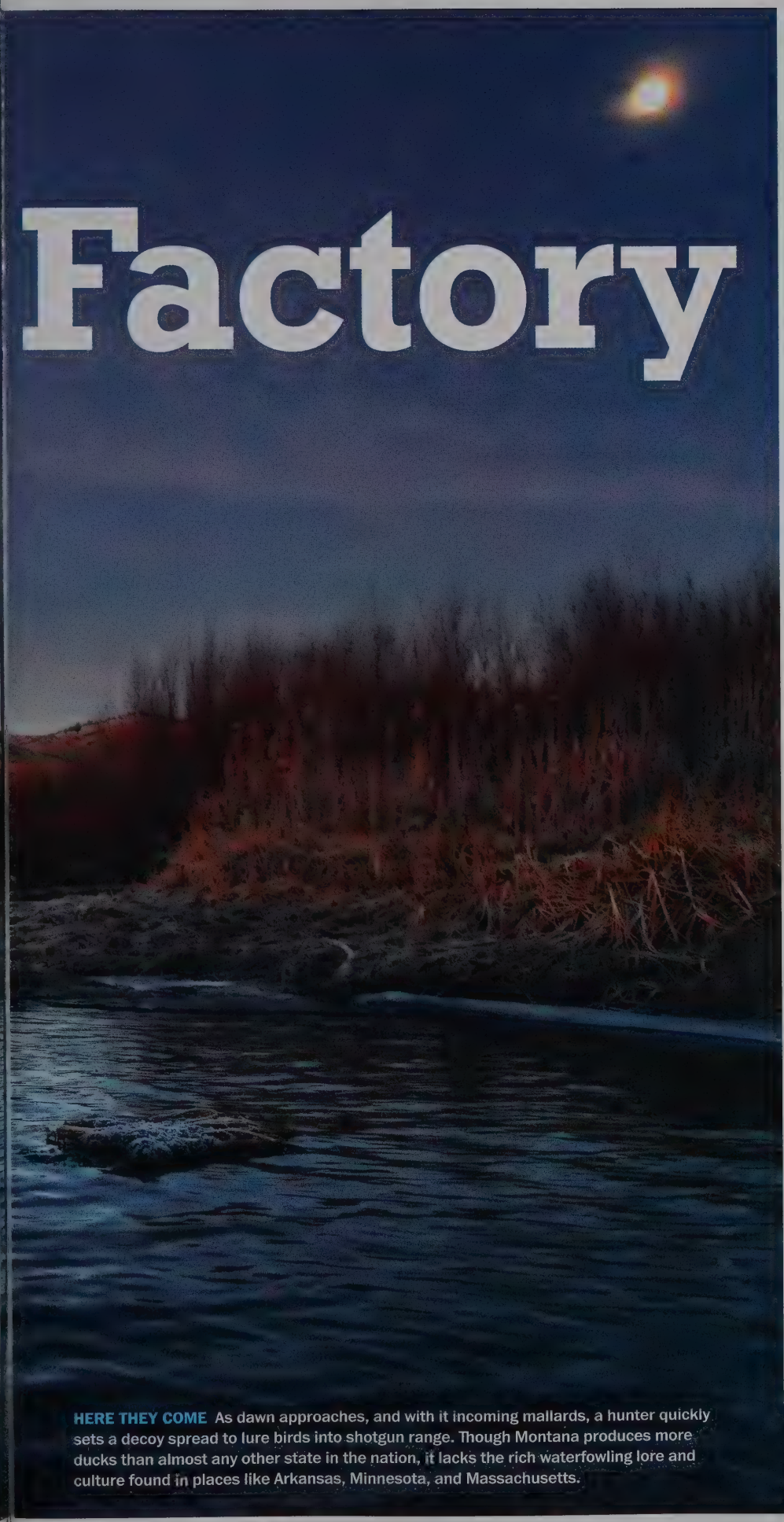
Running the Duck

How Montana manages its nationally significant (but often unrecognized) waterfowl populations. BY DAVE BOOKS



BEN PIERCE

Factory



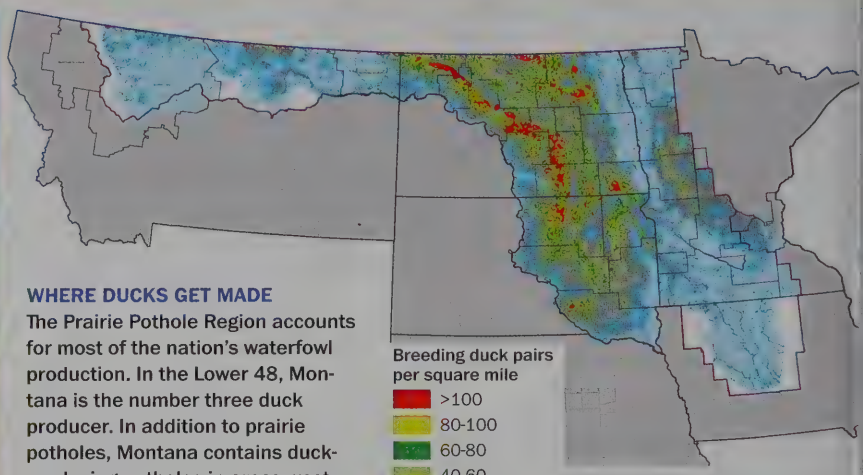
HERE THEY COME As dawn approaches, and with it incoming mallards, a hunter quickly sets a decoy spread to lure birds into shotgun range. Though Montana produces more ducks than almost any other state in the nation, it lacks the rich waterfowling lore and culture found in places like Arkansas, Minnesota, and Massachusetts.

Arriving before dawn, my hunting partner and I tossed out two dozen mallard decoys and settled into the cattails surrounding a small north-central Montana pothole, while two excited Labradors explored the muddy, shallow shoreline.

Ducks had left the pond in a flurry of quacks when we'd walked up. Now, 20 minutes later, we could hear the whistle of wings in the darkness overhead—a good omen.

Time stands still while you're waiting for legal shooting time on opening day of duck season. As I watched the sky gradually lighten in the east, I thought about other duck hunting dawns I'd witnessed across Montana, from Swan Lake in the northwest to Medicine Lake in the far northeast. Though my partner and I had this little pond to ourselves this morning, I knew that legions of like-minded hunters were opening the season at Ninepipe and Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuges west of the Continental Divide, Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area along the Rocky Mountain Front, and Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge near Malta. Others were hunkered down along countless reservoirs, river sloughs, and potholes all the way to the North Dakota line.

There's no question that Montana is a great state for duck hunting. Waterfowlers from across the country make a pilgrimage



WHERE DUCKS GET MADE
The Prairie Pothole Region accounts for most of the nation's waterfowl production. In the Lower 48, Montana is the number three duck producer. In addition to prairie potholes, Montana contains duck-producing potholes in areas west of the Continental Divide, like these (left) in the Blackfoot River Valley near Ovando.

MAP PRODUCED IN APRIL 2012 BY THE U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE AND THE PRAIRIE POTHOLE JOINT VENTURE

here each fall in pickups and SUVs packed with decoys, camping gear, and retrievers steaming up the windows. Montana is also one of the nation's most fertile waterfowl factories, ranking third in duck production in the Lower 48, trailing only the Dakotas.

Yet mention "Montana" to hunters outside of, or even within this state, and relatively few would conjure the image of drake mallards streaming across the sky or potholes packed with feeding teal.

Why is a state that produces so many ducks not considered a "duck state," complete with a long, rich waterfowling culture, like, say, Minnesota or Arkansas or even northern California? "Chalk it up to an embarrassment of riches," explains Jim Hansen, FWP waterfowl biologist in Billings. "We have so many other wildlife species and hunting opportunities—elk, antelope, deer, upland birds, and trophy big game species like bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and moose—that waterfowl tend to get lost in the crowd.

"I suspect that few Montanans—except our dedicated corps of duck hunters—realize how important we are in the overall waterfowl picture," Hansen adds. "In some years, Montana and the Dakotas combined actually produce more ducks than all of prairie Canada."

BOTH WATER AND GRASS

Such a prodigious output of waterfowl seems odd for a state known for its dry climate and periodic droughts. "It's because we have wetlands and we have grass, and both are blessings for waterfowl," explains Hansen. He says that while the rest of the United States has lost about half of its original wetlands, as well as more than 90 percent of its native prairie, Montana has managed to keep a large share of both. Because the soil here is less fertile and rainfall less abundant than in states farther east, Montana farmers have less incentive to drain their wetlands and convert the land to crops—although that definitely occurs. "States like Iowa have lost most of their duck-producing areas to wetland drainage," says Hansen. "Here in Montana, where we have a thriving cattle industry, we've kept more of our wetlands. Cattle need water and they need grass, and so do ducks."

> "Here in Montana, cattle need water and they need grass, and so do ducks."

It is also Montana's good fortune that the northeastern and north-central portions of the state fall within the Prairie Pothole Region, a vast glaciated area stretching south from the Canadian provinces through the Dakotas and east to parts of Minnesota and Iowa. When glaciers from the last ice age receded, they left behind shallow depressions that became wetlands rich in aquatic life. Known as North America's "duck factory," the region supports as many as 30 million breeding ducks when favorable water conditions prevail, as in the early 2010s.

Just as important as water—where ducks feed and avoid predators—is nearby grass for nesting. That's why the Conservation Reserve Program has been critical for waterfowl and other wildlife. Enacted in 1985, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays landowners to take highly erodible cropland out of production and plant it to tall grasses that stabilize soil and create wildlife habitat. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), the additional CRP grasslands in Montana and the Dakotas added as many as two million ducks per year to the fall migration.

Unfortunately, economic conditions have changed to the detriment of wetlands and grasslands. High prices for corn, especially, convinced many farmers to plow up their CRP grasslands. "In the last eight years we've lost a million and a half acres of CRP across Montana's portion of the Prairie Pothole Region alone," Hansen says. "Duck numbers are still strong, thanks to a series of wet years, but we'll need to work even harder to keep our remaining grasslands from being plowed under and converted to crops."

IT HAPPENED BEFORE

For that to occur, duck advocates will need to redouble efforts and work even more cooperatively and strategically. There's plenty of precedent. In the early 20th century,

Dave Books of Helena writes regularly for Ducks Unlimited *magazine and was editor of* Montana Outdoors *for 24 years.*

LEFT TO RIGHT: JOHN LAMBING; DONALD M. JONES; DONALD M. JONES

waterfowlers helped ban market hunting, passed laws to regulate duck harvest, and formed conservation groups like Ducks Unlimited (DU), a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing habitat for waterfowl. Bob Sanders, manager of DU's conservation programs in Montana, says that hunters have always paid most of the nation's waterfowl management costs by purchasing hunting licenses, paying excise taxes on guns and ammunition, and supporting conservation groups like DU. "Hunters pushed hard for passage of a federal duck stamp back in the Dust Bowl days, and Montana's annual share of that revenue—about $800,000 in recent years—funds a lot of wetland conservation work," he says.

Established by Congress in 1934, the federal duck stamp, officially known as the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, has provided more than $750 million for wetland habitat nationwide over the years. Just as important as the money was formation of a new model for waterfowl conservation embodied in an act of Congress that created the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) in 1986. The plan came in response to alarming declines in the continental duck population, caused by habitat loss.

A key provision of the NAWMP was creation of several "joint ventures" throughout North America to conserve wetlands and associated habitats. Within each joint venture, agencies, organizations, corporations, tribes, and individuals cooperatively conserve habitat for priority bird species and other wildlife. Montana is part of three joint ventures: Prairie Pothole, Intermountain West, and Northern Great Plains. While the conservation work targets waterfowl, it also creates great living and breeding habitat for shorebirds, prairie songbirds, and other grassland and wetland species.

MORE FEDERAL MONEY

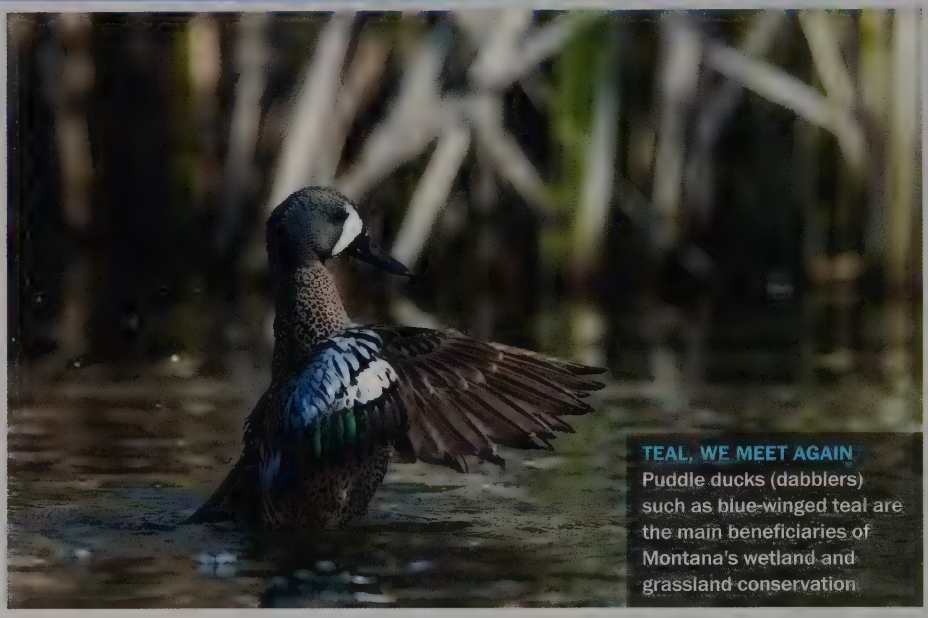
Though joint venture projects were able to use some federal duck stamp revenue, they required additional money for acquiring easements, identifying critical habitat, and helping landowners restore and protect private wetlands and grasslands. So in 1989, Congress passed another act that provides matching grants to organizations and individuals who cooperate on wetland conservation projects that conserve wildlife habitat, purify water, prevent erosion, and lessen flood damage.

These federal funds are often tripled or even quadrupled with matches by local partners. In Montana, more than $22 million in federal funds has been matched with an additional $100 million in partner contributions to protect nearly 320,000 acres of wildlife habitat. Montana's Migratory Bird Wetland Program, enacted by the state legislature in 1985 and administered by FWP, provides one important source of those matching funds (see sidebar on page 22 for details).

"These programs put dollars on the ground and ducks in the air for the benefit of all Montanans," says Sanders. Partnerships often include DU, FWP, The Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the USFWS, and private landowners. "Ranchers are our most important ally in a lot of these efforts," says Sanders. "Several excellent public programs pay them to conserve grasslands and improve livestock operations in ways that benefit wetland wildlife."

Other than weather, the most important factor affecting duck production is the federal Farm Bill and its conservation provisions. The latest Farm Bill, passed in 2014, disappointed many conservationists because it lowered by 15 percent the amount of CRP acreage nationwide that Congress would fund. Fortunately for wildlife, the new bill requires landowners to use good conservation practices if they hope to qualify for federal crop insurance. Landowners who drain wetlands or till virgin prairie put their insurance eligibility at risk. The new Farm Bill also provides some funding to the states for developing or strengthening public access programs like FWP's Open Fields.

PERFECT MIX Ducks need both grass, for nesting, and water, for feeding and avoiding predators. Ideal precipitation conditions in the early 2010s created record fall flights. But the rapid loss of CRP grasslands spells trouble for ducks—and duck hunters—in coming years.



TEAL, WE MEET AGAIN
Puddle ducks (dabblers) such as blue-winged teal are the main beneficiaries of Montana's wetland and grassland conservation

Montana's "stamp" is gone, but benefits to ducks remain

To hunt waterfowl in Montana, you need a basic hunting license and two special migratory game bird licenses. One is the federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (duck stamp), which you can buy at any post office and some sporting goods stores and FWP offices. The other is the state migratory bird license, available wherever you purchase your Montana hunting license.

Federal duck stamp dollars are used to acquire wetlands within the National Wildlife Refuge System or buy conservation easements on private wetlands or grasslands. State migratory bird license dollars are used by FWP to protect, conserve, and create wetlands. Montana's share of federal duck stamp revenue has been about $800,000 in recent years, while the state migratory bird license generates about $270,000 annually.

Recognizing that Montana had lost one-third of its original wetlands to drainage, the 1985 Montana Legislature authorized FWP to sell a migratory bird hunting stamp, or license, to help fund wetland conservation. Though the actual stamp and accompanying art contest were discontinued in 2004, the license provision remains intact. Revenue from sale of these licenses supports FWP's Migratory Bird Wetland Program, which is overseen by the citizen-based Wetland Protection Advisory Council.

"While waterfowl production is the main thrust, the program benefits all wetland-dependent species and provides critical ecosystem functions like water purification, flood control, and groundwater recharge," says Catherine Wightman, an FWP wildlife biologist who coordinates the program. "The goal is to stem the loss of wetlands and create a net gain in water quality and quantity across the landscape."

The council's five members represent migratory game bird hunters, wildlife watchers, and the agricultural industry. Council member Henry Gordon, a Chinook-area rancher, maintains that family cattle ranches are vital to maintaining Montana's wetlands and wildlife. "I'm a firm believer in preserving native grass and putting money into wetland improvements for the benefit of both waterfowl and cattle," he says.

Wightman points to several accomplishments of the Migratory Bird Wetland Program over the past three decades:

- restored, enhanced, or created 633 wetlands encompassing 5,162 acres;
- enhanced 9,807 acres of grasslands near wetlands; and
- permanently protected 3,700 acres of previously unprotected wetlands and grasslands.

"Our emphasis has shifted in recent years from projects that create wetlands to ones that protect and restore wetlands. This allows us to improve waterfowl breeding habitat over larger landscapes in Montana," Wightman says. "We often partner with the USFWS as well as private groups like Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and Pheasants Forever."

Wightman says that Montana's Migratory Bird Wetland Program also increases hunting opportunities whenever possible. "If there's a proposed easement that appears to have hunting potential, we negotiate with the landowner to provide access," she says. ■

HARVEST HOW MANY?

Conserving and restoring habitat to grow ducks is half of waterfowl management. The other half is regulating hunter harvest.

Hunters can kill a certain percentage of ducks in a population without affecting its size down the road. This "harvestable surplus" replaces natural mortality, such as from predation and disease, that would otherwise reduce the population by roughly the same amount. Biologists figure out how many ducks hunters can shoot each fall by looking at spring breeding numbers, habitat conditions, and the previous year's harvest.

For the purposes of setting seasons and limits, the United States and Canada are divided into four "flyways" (Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific), each with a flyway council composed of federal and state representatives. Montana falls within two flyways, Central and Pacific. (The dividing line runs down the state's middle, from about Havre to West Yellowstone.) Advised by technical committees that evaluate waterfowl population and hunter harvest data, the councils recommend hunting seasons and bag limits to the USFWS, which in turn establishes a regulatory framework for each flyway. States can impose regulations more restrictive than the federal framework, but not more liberal.

> "The ducks have returned to the marsh, but the hunters haven't. That's a big concern."

"Federal frameworks dictate shorter seasons and smaller bag limits when duck numbers decline or breeding conditions deteriorate, like during the early 1990s drought that struck major duck-producing

LEFT TO RIGHT: STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER; DONALD M. JONES; DENVER BRYAN

HOMECOMING A drake mallard drops into a Montana marsh. Each year Montana receives roughly $1 million in state and federal duck stamp funds used to purchase wetlands and conservation easements that benefit waterfowl and other wetland wildlife.

states and provinces," says Jim Hansen, Montana's representative on the Central Flyway's waterfowl technical committee. When conditions improve, he adds, such as during recent wet years, the federal framework allows for increased season length and bag limits.

NO CHILD LEFT UNCAMOED

It's a warm morning in early August, but judging by all the decoys, dogs, shotguns, and other hunting gear on display at Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area, it could be opening day of duck season. The event is a youth waterfowl and upland bird hunting clinic, sponsored by FWP and the USFWS with help from the Golden Triangle Sporting Dog Club and the Great Falls chapter of DU. Before the day is over, the boys and girls here will learn how to identify ducks, estimate shooting distance, set decoys, call ducks, and handle retrieving dogs.

The kids here today represent the future of Montana's waterfowl hunting—not to mention waterfowl conservation.

Hansen says such clinics are vital to stemming the decline in hunter numbers. During the drought of the 2000s, fewer Montanans went duck hunting. "We expected that," Hansen says. "But in recent years, even with record duck populations, we haven't seen as much of a participation rebound as in the past. The ducks have returned to the marsh, but the hunters haven't. That's a big concern."

Hansen says federal duck stamp sales in Montana peaked in the late 1950s at close to 37,000, then dropped to a low of about 13,000 during the drought of the early 1990s. Over the past decade—good years for both water and ducks—federal stamp sales have stabilized at about 20,000.

Duck lovers hope that clinics, along with Montana's special youth waterfowl hunt on the weekend before the general season opener, will help build a stronger waterfowling tradition in Montana. "We've always had dedicated duck hunters, but we've never had the mystique of duck hunting meccas like Maryland with its Chesapeake Bay, the Dakotas with their thousands of potholes, or Arkansas with its national duck calling championship," says Hansen. "Fortunately, Montana has a large chunk of North America's duck factory. As long as we can conserve that, we'll always have ducks in this state, and that gives me hope for the future of the sport."

BETTER THAN XBOX? A young hunter-to-be watches ducks approach a blind as his dad calls the birds closer. Despite record duck numbers in recent years, hunter numbers have not rebounded as in the past. Kids provide waterfowling's hope for the future.

WE LUCKY FEW

Let's pause the gloom-a-thon for just a moment to remember that we get to hunt in *Montana*.

By Tom Dickson

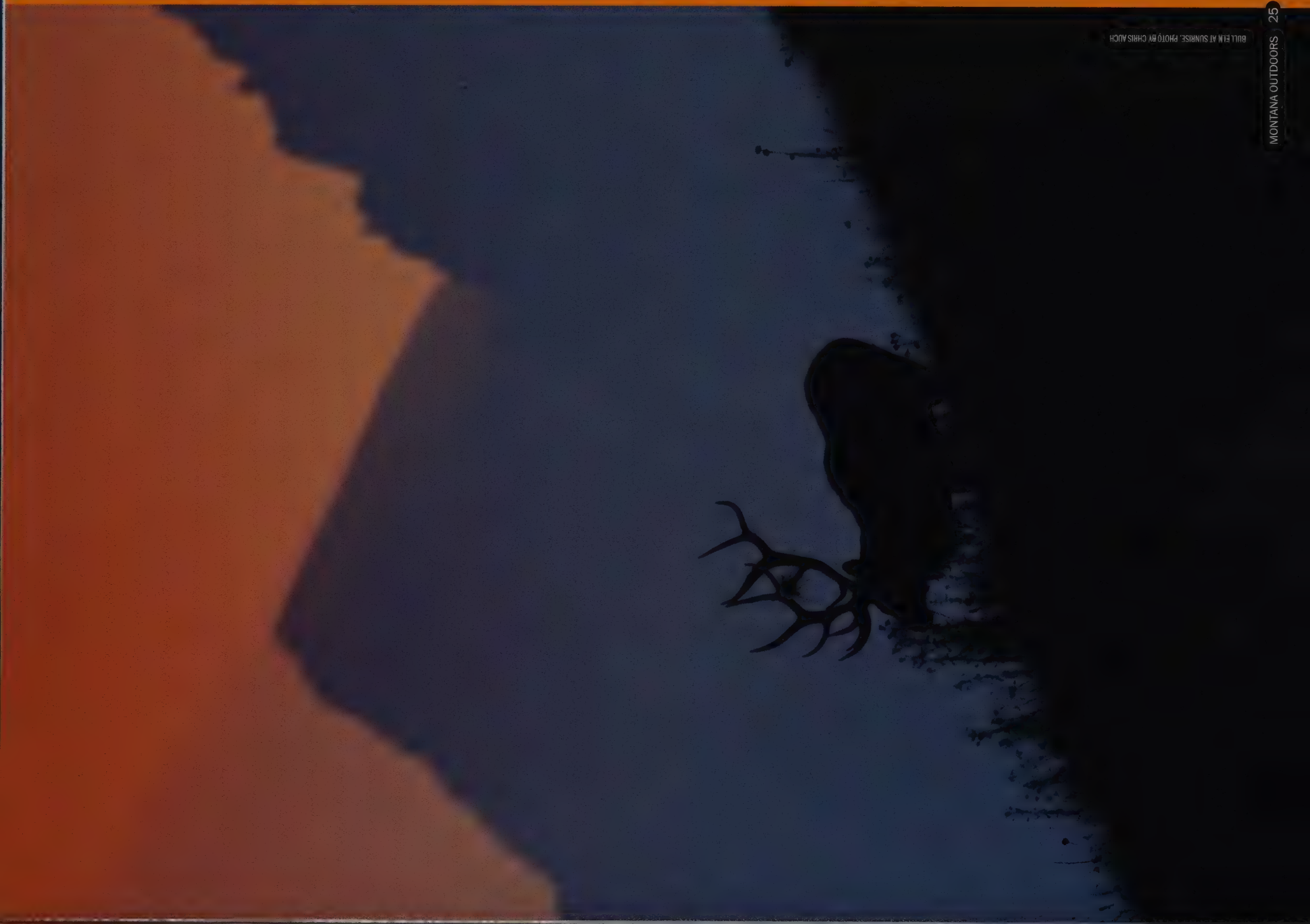
What a drag.

Once again, the good people at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks—and they are in fact good people—didn't send me a mountain goat permit. That's what—seven, eight years in a row now? And you probably didn't draw your bull tag for the Elkhorns or the Breaks or whatever other popular permit you put in for. Again.

Then there's the deer and pronghorn hunting in much of central Montana, which, let's face it, stunk last year and the year before. And don't get me started on elk. They seem harder to find pretty much everywhere. Pheasant hunting sure isn't what it used to be, when you could go out *without a dog* and have your limit before lunchtime. Huns have all but disappeared, at least where I look. The doors on more and more private land have shut for public hunters, so that stinks too. And on public land, the mountains are steeper, the trails longer, the competition more fierce. Even if you kill an elk, it's harder to get the carcass back to the truck, what with our bad backs and creaky knees.

Woe is us. Woe, woe, woe. ▸▸

8 MILLION ACRES OF PRIVATE LAND ACCESS THROUGH BLOCK MANAGEMENT • BLACK BEARS • SIX WEEKS OF DEER AND ELK BOWHUNTING • TROPHY BIGHORN SHEEP • PHEASANTS
150,000 ELK • MULE AND WHITE-TAILED DEER • DUCKS • MOUNTAIN LIONS • FIVE WEEKS OF DEER AND ELK FIREARM HUNTING • MOUNTAIN GROUSE • TROPHY BULL ELK • MOUNTAIN
GOATS • SPRING AND FALL WILD TURKEY • HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE • 30 MILLION ACRES OF PUBLIC HUNTING LAND • MOOSE • GEESE • PRONGHORN • SHARP-TAILED GROUSE



BULL ELK AT SUNRISE. PHOTO BY CHRIS ACH

But let's maybe take a time out from all our complaining (I'm as bad as anyone). Let's pause here for a few moments at the start of Montana's 2015 hunting season and take a clear-eyed look at how hunting has supposedly gotten so hard, how game populations have apparently declined from one end of the state to the other. How hunting access to local ranches and farms has become "impossible."

Because if we do that, if we take off the gloom glasses and look objectively at what Montana offers, it becomes pretty clear pretty fast that we have it good. Real good. In many cases, even better than those so-called golden years—of, what, the 1960s? the '80s? when—how does it go?—7 x 7 bulls wandered right into elk camp, FWP handed out bighorn tags right and left, and 30-inch muley bucks would just stand there munching bunchgrass 150 yards away.

Just consider how remarkably long we get to hunt. Most other states offer big game seasons that last a week to ten days, tops. In Montana, it's six weeks of deer and elk archery, then another five weeks of deer and elk firearms—and that's just for starters. If you really wanted to—and could afford it (and were willing to risk losing your spouse to a better-looking replacement who spent more time at home)—you could start hunting in mid-August (archery pronghorn) and continue uninterrupted (with upland birds, big game, waterfowl, mountain lion, and wild turkey) through the end of spring bear season on June 15. That's practically year-round.

Then there's the big game itself: mountain goats, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, moose, elk, both white-tailed and mule deer, black bears, wolves, and mountain lions. And lots of them. Consider that in 1990, Montana was home to 40,000 elk. Today the number is 150,000 to 160,000. We've also got 450,000 deer, 13,000 black bears, and 120,000 pronghorn.

Montana also lays claim to the whole suite of major upland species, including ruffed, spruce, and blue grouse in the mountains; pheasants, Hungarian partridge, sharp-tailed grouse, and sage-grouse in the prairies; and sandhill cranes, tundra swans, both snow and

Continued on page 31.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

LEFT TO RIGHT: STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER; DONALD M. JONES

If we take off the gloom glasses and look objectively at what Montana offers, it becomes pretty clear pretty fast that we have it good. **Real good.**

DENVER BRYAN

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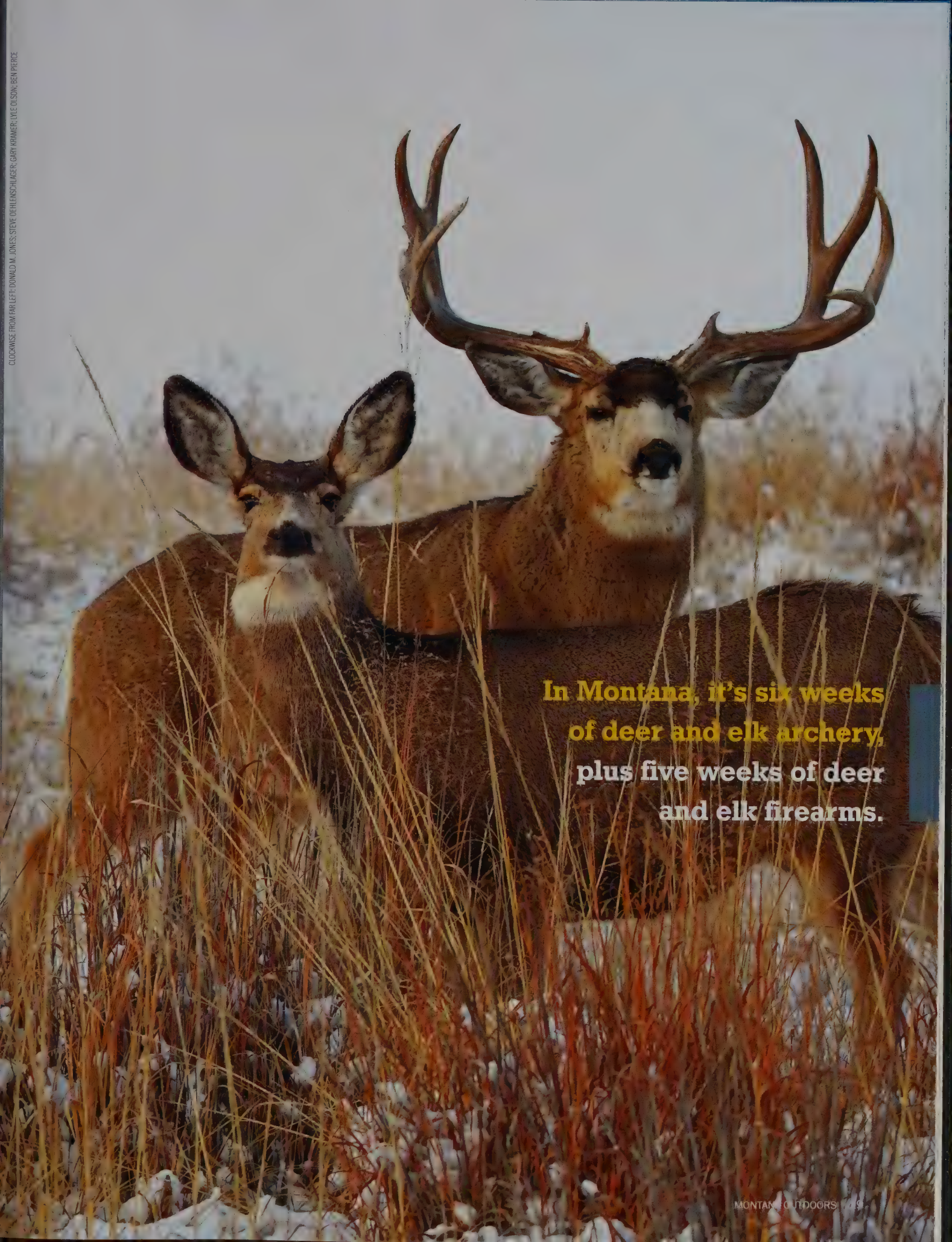


CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: DONALD M. JONES; STEVE OF HELENSCHLAGER; GARY KRAMER; LYLE OLSON; BEN PIERCE

In Montana, it's six weeks of deer and elk archery, plus five weeks of deer and elk firearms.

Continued from page 27.

Canada geese, and 20-some duck species over water and fields. Plus wild turkeys and mourning doves. Even some chukars.

Those 40-plus game species nearly sum up all the hunting opportunities in the entire United States. And they're all right here. All for us lucky few.

And by few, I mean not many hunters, despite what you might think when pulling into the parking lot of a popular wildlife management area on opening morning. Of the 13 million hunters in the United States, less than 2 percent hunt each fall in Montana (235,000 residents and nonresidents combined). To top it off, that relative handful of hunters is spread out across the fourth-largest state in the union. That makes for a lot of land for each hunter to explore.

Of course, not everything is so rosy. Mule deer numbers east of the Continental Divide are still down from a few decades ago. Whitetail numbers dropped in much of central Montana for a few years due to hemorrhagic diseases (but are rebounding). The pronghorn population took a beating in much of the state's prairie region after the brutal winter of 2010-11 (it too is bouncing back). And elk are indeed harder to hunt in many areas for many reasons, like more irrigated farmland that attracts elk but is increasingly off-limits to public hunting.

There's no denying that access to private land has declined in many areas over the past few decades. But that loss has been offset by the 7 to 8 million acres of private land available through the Block Management Program each year over the past three decades. Then there's the 30 million acres of public hunting land available in Montana, not to mention several million acres of private property that hunters get on through friends, family, or plain old-fashioned (and still remarkably effective) door knocking.

All that access results in a lot of days afield and a lot of filled tags. Last year 107,663 elk hunters killed 25,735 elk, of which 5,637 were bulls carrying racks of six points or more. By the way, that's a 36 percent increase in big bulls from ten years earlier.

As for those permits no one ever seems to draw? Last year 357 hunters drew moose tags and killed 252 bulls; 388 bighorn sheep hunters shot 120 rams—many of them Boone & Crockett caliber—and 270 mountain goat hunters harvested 136 billies.

As for me, no doubt my time will come to draw one of those coveted moose, sheep, goat, or bull elk permits in the annual FWP lotteries. Yours will, too.

In the meantime, just being able to spend another fall in Montana with rifle, bow, or shotgun in hand, hunting millions of acres of private and public land for deer, elk, upland birds, and waterfowl, makes us the envy of hunters across the United States.

If you ask me, we've already won the most important lottery of all.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JAIME & LISA JOHNSON; DONALD M. JONES; CHRIS AUCH; DAWN Y. WILSON; JESSE LEE VARNADO

Mastering Block Management

No one ever said having 8 million acres of private land to hunt would be easy. **By Dave Carty**

THE PAYOFF Getting the most out of Montana's Block Management Program requires more than obtaining a few maps and driving around. The most successful hunters study the annual booklet, scout new areas, and capitalize on the many high-quality opportunities that often require planning, phone calls, and even drawings.

LEFT TO RIGHT: JACK BALLARD; DONALD M. JONES

When Mike England's plans for a hunt in eastern Montana changed, he suddenly found himself with nowhere to go.

"A friend had lined me up with some private land, but when I got there, that had fallen through, and I couldn't get on," England recalls. "So I went to the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional office in Miles City, and several people at tables were helping hunters find landowners' phone numbers and providing tips about each Block Management Area."

England, a Bozeman magazine publisher, then sat down with FWP's regional Block Management Area (BMA) booklet, or guide, and started looking for descriptions of areas that might provide the best hunting for the deer and antelope he was after. He quickly realized, however, that the booklet and accompanying maps provided only so much information. "They tell you which species are available, but you don't know how abundant those species are, where the roads are, and what the landscape looks like."

His next step? Get back on the road.

"What I ended up doing, and what I did for the next few years, was to devote one day to driving around to look at BMAs I'd planned to hunt for that year, trying to get a feel for the terrain and the landscape," he says. "Once I saw what looked good, I started calling the landowners. That first day I called 20 people. I got four or five places lined up for the next day."

England's phone work paid off. BMA booklets only note whether or not an area contains certain game species, but not the likelihood of seeing those species. For instance, a BMA that lists "antelope" and "mule deer" might contain only a few antelope but many muleys. "But on the phone, the landowners let me know exactly what was going on at their place," says England.

That type of pre-hunt research can pay big dividends on BMAs. For his extra legwork, England took home two eastern Montana deer and two antelope that trip.

Effort like England's is not essential. Roughly 7 to 8 million acres of private property is enrolled in Montana's Block Management Program, making plenty of land available to any resident or nonresident hunter. All you have to do is pick up a BMA booklet at a regional FWP office or order one online from the FWP website. (Visit fwp.mt.us, click on the "Hunting" tab and then click on "Block Management" under the "Public Access" heading.)

But obtaining the booklet and getting the most out of the BMAs listed inside are two very different things. To consistently hunt Block Management successfully requires an understanding of how access to different areas varies and what that means in terms of hunting quality. It also requires legwork—sometimes lots of it.

EASY ON You can hunt Type 1 BMAs on the spur of the moment. The downside: So can everyone else.

Quantity versus quality

The first step to becoming a Block Management master is to recognize that BMAs come in two different types, each with its pros and cons.

At Type 1 areas, all hunters "administer their own permission." In other

words, you can drive to the designated parking area, check in at the sign-in box, and start hunting. No phone call or personal visit with the landowner is required.

Sound too good to be true? In a way, it is.

That's because most Type 1 BMAs, while providing good and occasionally even great hunting, generally don't limit hunter numbers. As a result, the best Type 1 areas see a *lot* of use.

Type 2 BMAs are "administered by someone other than the hunter," typically the landowner or an FWP staff member or contract worker. That means hunters have to call or visit the landowner or dial a special FWP number and make a reservation or even apply in an access drawing. Because access is controlled, crowding is rarely a problem. But the downside is that you may have to book a slot weeks or even months in advance, or, with access lotteries, risk not getting drawn at all.

But that's the beauty of Block Management: options. On the spur of the moment, you can hop in your vehicle and hit a bunch of Type 1 BMAs over the weekend, no planning required. Or, if you're after a higher-quality experience, you can jump through the extra hoops required on Type 2 areas and make the requisite phone calls, reservations, or lottery applications.

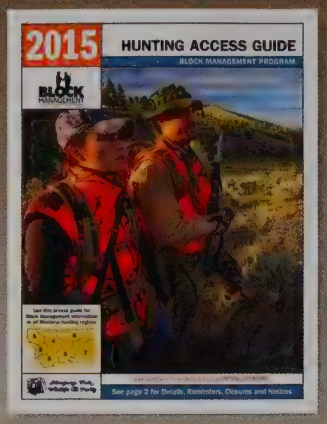
"Basically you get what you pay for in terms of effort to gain access on BMAs," says Alan Charles, FWP's coordinator of landowner/sportsman relations and coordinator of the Block Management Program. "In most cases—though certainly this isn't true all the time—the more steps to obtaining permission, the better the quality of the hunting experience in terms of crowding and opportunities to find game. Some of our BMAs offer the kinds of opportunities you might get on an outfitted hunt. But those aren't areas you can hunt anytime you want."

Eggs in many baskets

As for deciding which BMAs to hunt, hunters can take two approaches. One is to learn a few areas well and hunt them hard. "Whenever you spend more time hunting a BMA, you're going to be more successful than the person just showing up for the first time," says Dale Nixdorf, FWP regional BMA coordinator for south-central Montana. By hunting the same areas year after year, says Nixdorf, hunters learn where to find resting and bedding areas, movement funnels, feeding areas, and more.

The disadvantage of mastering just a few BMAs, however, is that if you arrive and see them awash in other hunters—like on opening weekend or the week around Thanksgiving—you're stuck. That's why Block Management officials recommend that hunters regularly scout new areas so they have several backups.

"Don't put all your eggs in one basket," Charles says. "Pick out a key BMA or two that you really want to focus on, but have some fallback areas too. Maybe you're really banking on a Type 2 area where you have a reservation, but when you get there it's been grazed more heavily than in years past. Have a few nearby Type 1 areas you can fall back on, areas you've previously scouted so you know what they're like. And always consider checking out other options, such as legally accessible public land, or maybe just knocking on a landowner's door."



Block Management Ethics

Don't

- Shoot near outbuildings or homes.
- Walk through herds of livestock.
- Litter.
- Allow your dog to chase deer, livestock, or the landowner's pets.
- Drive off established roads unless you have received permission to do so.

Do

- Close all gates you open.
- Treat other hunters with courtesy and respect. They have as much right to be there as you do.
- Consider informing the landowner beforehand if you plan on party hunting with three or more people.
- Consider sending the landowner a thank you note or gift or thanking him or her in person.

Narrowing it down

One of the biggest challenges to mastering the Block Management system is the sheer number of BMAs available to hunters, especially across eastern Montana. In FWP's Region 7 (southeastern Montana), 320 landowners have enrolled 2.5 million private acres into Block Management this year, while in Region 6 (northeastern Montana), 310 landowners have enrolled 1.2 million private acres.

Where does a hunter even begin?

Tim Potter, FWP regional BMA coordinator in Glasgow, says maps can be a big help. "Some guys come out here and have no idea where they want to go or what they want to do," he says. "We have pretty detailed maps that can help them zero in on where to go."

The BMA booklets contain large fold-out maps of each region showing the general location of each BMA. But to really see what an area looks like, you need a BMA site map, available online on the FWP website, at regional offices, or, in some cases, at the BMA sign-in boxes. The maps show exact boundaries, often overlaid on U.S. Geological Survey topos. By examining maps, hunters can locate water sources, ridges, ravines, and other landscape features used by wildlife, as well as adjacent public lands that may be accessible via the BMA.

Actually read the booklet

Probably the most valuable resource for getting the most out of your BMA hunt is the booklet itself, officially known as the *Block Management Program Hunting Access Guide*. "At first glance, it appears to be just a listing of all the BMAs by region," says Charles. "But most hunters don't realize that there's a lot of other valuable hunting information in that guide." The booklet explains what's unique to each region and how each one administers the Block Management Program. For instance, some regions take reservations via a telephone answering service. And some provide county-by-county listings of wildlife species or the current status of big game populations.

Charles, who regularly hunts BMAs

Bozeman writer Dave Carty is a longtime contributor to Montana Outdoors.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MONTANA FWP; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; ALLEN HAY; GARY KRAMER

MORE HOOPS BUT MORE OPPORTUNITIES Type 2 BMAs require hunters to contact landowners in person or by phone, call an FWP hotline, or apply for a drawing. By limiting hunters, the additional hurdles often create higher-quality hunting opportunities.

himself, recommends that all hunters read through the guide carefully for a better sense of what each region offers. "I think it would help them develop more realistic expectations," he says. "Before you look at the more detailed BMA site maps, the booklet and larger regional maps give you a general idea of where you might want to hunt.

"Maybe you want to focus on a remote, lone BMA that likely doesn't see much use," Charles says. "Or maybe you want to find a group of areas that are close to each other. Or focus on areas near towns so you can stay in motels. You can find all that and more in the guide."

After you finish reading, it's time for some scouting. Ken Farthing, FWP regional BMA coordinator in Great Falls, says, "Once you have your maps, look at the areas to see if they're what you're looking for before committing time to actually hunting."

With so many millions of acres of BMAs statewide, FWP staff can't inspect all properties. Some may be good for a few years but then lose their prime wildlife habitat. If you find an area to be sub-par, let FWP know. "Any hunters who consider BMAs to be below their expected standards should bring them to our attention," Farthing says. "For example, one BMA was in CRP [Conservation Reserve Program] up until last year. But we didn't find out until halfway through the hunting season that the landowner had taken it out of CRP and plowed up the grass. This year, that place will not be re-enrolled in Block Management."

Journals and boot leather

Another tip for getting the most out of Block Management: Keep a simple hunting journal that includes information on the areas you hunt. Include things like each area's habitat, game species you see, watering holes for hunting dogs, and other vital information. Journals can be invaluable in seasons to come, when details of an area you visited a year or two before become fuzzy. If you plan on hunting opening day—and most of us do—knowing the lay of the land and where you've found game in years past can be a huge advantage when it comes to beating the crowds.

Another tip: Outwalk everyone else. Some BMAs are many miles across. If you're willing to hike just a little farther than everyone else, you'll probably have a better hunt.

How far is enough? FWP officials say most hunters rarely venture more than a mile from their trucks. If you spend a half hour walking at least that far from the parking area, you'll leave most other hunters behind—and the few you might run into deserve to be there as much as you do.

One last tip, this one more of a long-term strategy as well as simple common courtesy: If you've had a great hunt on a BMA, consider letting the landowner know. None of them are getting rich by enrolling in the Block Management Program. Payments are capped at $12,000, and the average payment per landowner is around $3,500, says Charles. "Even though the state has negotiated a contract, taking the time to thank the landowner makes a difference," he says.

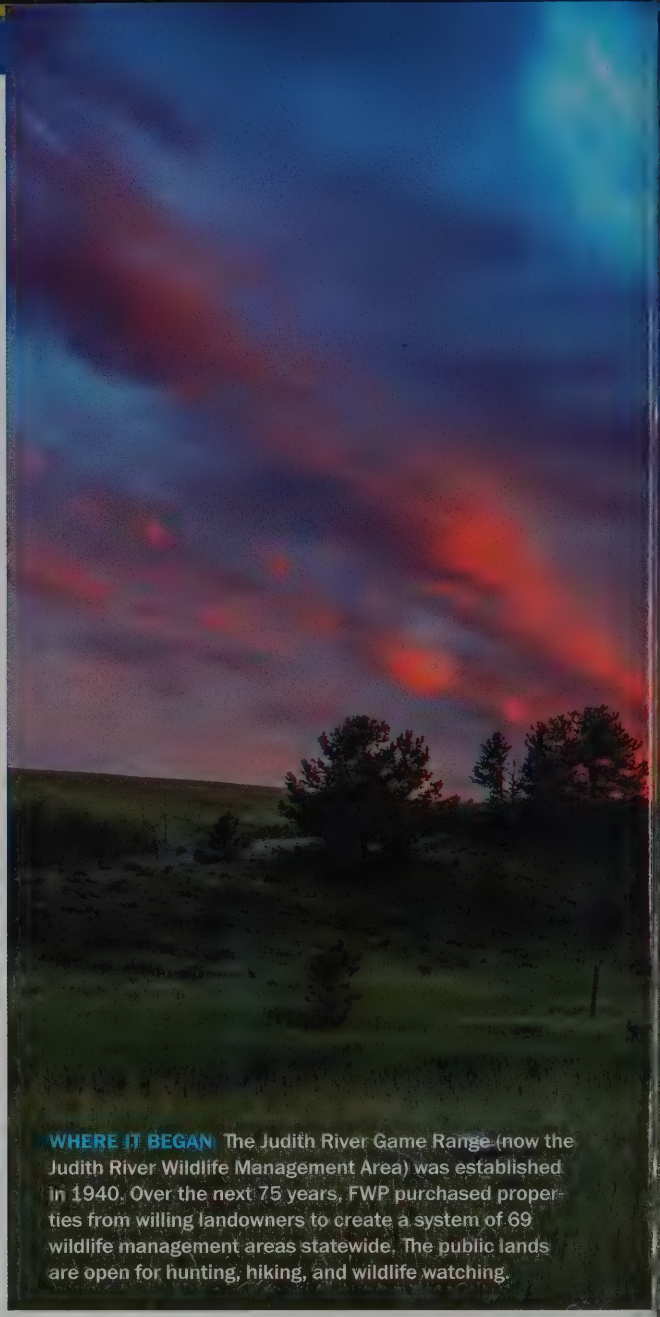
In addition to this gesture of civility, your thanks may inspire the landowner to re-enroll next year. That's good for the state, good for the landowner, and, not least, good for you and the tens of thousands of other resident and nonresident hunters who hunt on and enjoy these highly accessible private lands.

FLUSH WITH SUCCESS To master Block Management, walk farther from parking areas than everyone else; apply for Type 2 areas that limit hunters; or hopscotch among several Type 1 areas until you luck upon game that others have passed by.

The Judith Turns 75

Montana's popular wildlife management area system celebrates its diamond anniversary with the acquisition that started it all.

By Bruce Auchly. WMA photos by Chris McGowan.



WHERE IT BEGAN The Judith River Game Range (now the Judith River Wildlife Management Area) was established in 1940. Over the next 75 years, FWP purchased properties from willing landowners to create a system of 69 wildlife management areas statewide. The public lands are open for hunting, hiking, and wildlife watching.

Sometimes a good idea is just that. And sometimes it's even better. This year marks the 75th anniversary of Montana's wildlife management area (WMA) program. Once known as game ranges, WMAs have expanded from their original mission as places for elk to spend winter without being bothered by humans—and without bothering nearby ranches.

But they are still all about habitat.

"A lot of species benefit from WMAs," says Rick Northrup, Wildlife Habitat Bureau chief for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "From a societal standpoint there is a benefit to having elk winter range, but WMAs also provide water for waterfowl and nesting cover for birds."

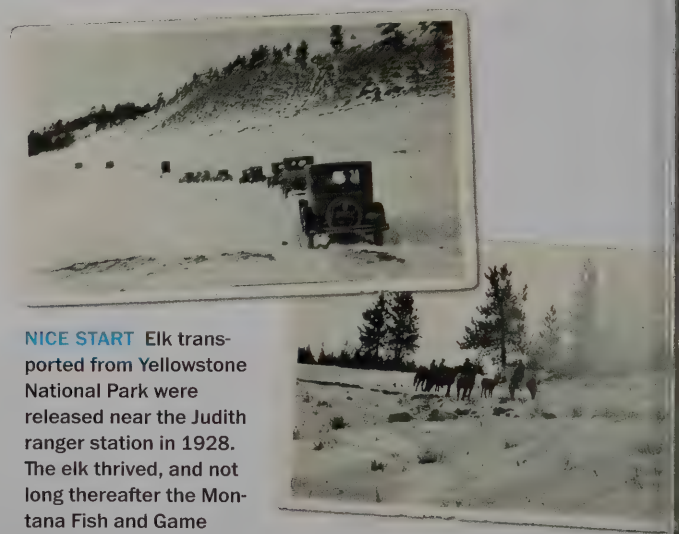
Wildlife habitat. Now, there's a great idea.

It's difficult for anyone born since World War II to imagine the absence of wildlife 75 years ago.

Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials. It doesn't matter. We all have been brought up in the golden age of wildlife management. Our grandparents and great-grandparents could tell us what it was like when wildlife was scarce, and what they did about it.

"There weren't too many elk in the 1940s," says Robert Noel, 84, whose uncle sold 768 acres to the Montana Fish and Game Department (FWP's precursor) in 1950. The land is now in the center of the Judith River WMA, Montana's first game range. "There were mule deer, but we had very few, if any, elk," Noel says.

About 100 years ago, Montana's big game populations reached rock



NICE START Elk transported from Yellowstone National Park were released near the Judith ranger station in 1928. The elk thrived, and not long thereafter the Montana Fish and Game Department bought 1,004 acres from a local ranching family to conserve winter range.

JUDITH RIVER GAME RANGE
This Management Area was purchased by the Fish & Game Commission to provide a big game wintering range, thus relieving adjoining private lands of serious game use. The project was paid for by sportsmen through hunting and fishing license sales and wildlife restoration funds derived from the sale of sporting arms and ammunition.
MONTANA FISH AND GAME COMMISSION

bottom for a variety of reasons, including overhunting and habitat destruction. One of the first steps in restoring those populations was to transplant elk from other areas and then protect the animals from overharvest. Starting in 1910, elk were captured from Yellowstone National Park and other areas and moved throughout the state. Many of today's elk in the Judith River drainage descended from 86 animals planted there in the winter of 1927-28.

Protection came from regulated hunting seasons. The state hired game wardens to enforce the new laws.

By the late 1930s, elk and deer populations had improved so much that landowners complained about wintering wildlife competing with their livestock for forage. In 1937, a Montana rancher was acquitted of illegally shooting four elk feeding on his wheat crop. State laws resulting from that court case required the Fish and Game Department to assist landowners in reducing wildlife depredation losses.

A few years later, however, another rancher, C. R. Rathbone, was arrested for killing an elk damaging his property. The case went to the Montana Supreme Court, which ruled that landowners had to accept "some injury to property or inconvenience from wild game for which there is no recourse." Caught between these two mandates, the Fish and Game Department decided on a two-pronged approach. First, increase the elk harvest; second, buy from willing sellers high-quality habitat that would help keep elk off private lands.

In 1940, the department bought 1,004 acres from the Setter family. That central Montana parcel south of Utica was the first of eight acquisitions over the next half-century that resulted in what is today the 9,658-acre Judith River Wildlife Management Area.

"It showed great foresight by the leaders of the department over 75 years ago," says Mark Schlepp, FWP central region wildlife management area manager based in Fairfield. "They knew that elk recovery required state properties that the wildlife could use seasonally—in the Judith's case, in winter—reducing impacts to private landowners. Unlike other western states that instead artificially fed huge numbers of wintering elk and created disease problems from all that crowding, Montana went the route of acquiring grass on the ground to feed big game naturally."

The approach worked.

"We have a ton of elk there," says Mark Rogers, who in 1992 sold FWP 1,893 acres that was added to the east and north sides of the WMA. Rogers still lives across the road from the Judith. "When I was in high school, there would be 400 to 500 elk there in the winter. Now there's 1,000 or more," he says.

NEARLY 70 WMAS

Including the Judith, FWP now owns 69 wildlife management areas that provide habitat not just for deer and elk but also a wide range of other game and nongame wildlife. Total acreage stands at roughly 300,000 acres. Though that may sound like a lot of land, WMAs account for just one-third of 1 percent of Montana's total land base. In addition, the land remains on local tax rolls and FWP pays property taxes on it each year.

WMAs encompass intermountain grasslands, mountain forests, plains grasslands and forests, shrub grasslands, river bottoms, and wetlands. This diversity provides key habitats for big game animals, waterfowl, and upland birds. WMAs are also home to warblers, raptors, furbearers, federally threatened species, and dozens of state species of concern, like the swift fox and pygmy shrew.

FWP doesn't buy land for a WMA unless it's packed with wildlife and recreational opportunities. "Wildlife management areas get a lot of use, and not just from hunters," Northrup says. "Bird watchers visit them in the summer. On Marshall Creek and Fish Creek WMAs in western Montana, snowmobiling is allowed in designated areas. And Mount Haggin in southwestern Montana offers miles of cross-country ski trails."

Funding to buy these areas came from hunters, primarily through license fees and a federal excise tax on firearms and ammunition divided among states to conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat.

When Montana acquired the first parcels for the Judith River WMA, the idea of restoring wildlife by protecting habitat was just gaining popularity. Today, conserving habitat

At 300,000 acres, FWP's 69 wildlife management areas comprise just one-third of 1 percent of Montana's total land base.

is the foundation of all wildlife management. The idea of what habitat is and how it works continues to evolve. Conservationists now recognize the interconnectedness of animal species and plant communities as well as the importance of WMAs. These areas aren't just any old lands but rather cornerstones of larger complexes of wildlife habitat. For example, a WMA may comprise only 5 or 10 percent of an ecosystem, but it provides a key component for wildlife survival. "Sometimes people don't realize why winter range is so important," says FWP's Northrup. "But it supports elk from a much larger summer range."

Examples include three WMAs on the Rocky Mountain Front—Sun River, Ear Mountain, and Blackleaf. Elk come from throughout the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex east of the Continental Divide to spend harsh winter months on these wildlife areas along the Front, where winds blow snow off slopes to expose grass.

NEW APPROACHES

WMA management has changed over time in response to changing conditions. Take winter depredation. Though one goal of buying winter range for a WMA is to keep big game animals off adjacent ranches, things don't always work out that way. Deer and elk don't care about boundaries and sometimes continue grazing downslope onto private property.

So years ago, wildlife managers came up with an innovative solution: Allow carefully managed cattle grazing on some WMAs.

Local ranchers rotate cattle grazing between their property and adjacent WMAs to periodically rest vegetation so it can regenerate. This "rest-rotation" grazing system improves forage on state and private properties for both the rancher's cattle and the deer and elk that feed there in winter. The cattle eat lesser-quality grass such as smooth brome that gets too coarse for elk and deer. When new vegetation appears, game animals find it and use it.

Perhaps an equally important benefit is to the landowner's bottom line. "When we set up a grazing lease with a neighbor, we provide additional acreage for his livestock," says Northrup. "Maybe that benefits the neighbor enough to stay in ranching rather than sell the land for housing or other development."

Elk need grass, but not the mowed bluegrass kind. Big game and housing don't mix.

No one knows that better than Schlepp, the central region WMA manager, who has witnessed firsthand how important a WMA and surrounding working ranches can be to big game populations. He grew up on a farm just a few miles north of the Judith, started hunting on the game range as a young man, and hunts there still.

"I've watched both the Judith and its elk herd grow through the lean years of the 1960s into what they are today," he says. "I've been fortunate to have hunted there for most of my life, and to see firsthand as a sportsman and an FWP employee what a smart decision it was 75 years ago for department leaders to acquire that first piece of winter range. And then for us as a department to continue building on that decision to create the WMA system we now have."

Hunting, birding, and more

Location: The Judith River WMA sits 40 miles southwest of Lewistown at the base of the Little Belt Mountains. For directions, visit the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov) and click on the "Fish & Wildlife" tab then the "Wildlife Management Areas" link.

Big game species: Elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and pronghorn

Recreation: Hunting, wildlife watching and photography, hiking, and horseback riding

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Bruce Auchly manages the FWP Information and Education Program in Great Falls.
Chris McGowan is a photographer in Helena.

WILD AND SCENIC Acquired over the years from willing sellers, the Judith River Wildlife Management Area southwest of Lewistown provides wildlife habitat and recreation for bird watchers, hunters, hikers, and photographers.

Bowhunting's "infinity of contraptions"

by Bruce Auchly

Archery season has arrived, and with it all the outdoor catalogs and sporting goods stores full of the latest gadgets, gizmos, and geegaws.

Technology.

How much is enough? How much is too much? If you're looking for help in deciding what is legal, check the FWP hunting regulations. But if you're looking for help with the ethics of it all, you'll need to talk to a higher power (or your own conscience).

Montana game laws state the legal length and weight of an arrow, and describe in detail what constitutes a broadhead.

But no law says to the archer, Thou shalt not shoot at an elk or deer walking 75 yards away. Only the knowledge that such a shot will likely result in a mortally wounded animal that may not be found prevents most bowhunters from releasing that arrow.

The problem as seen from this corner is that the latest bowhunting technology might lead an archer to believe that 75-yard shots are the rule and will result in easy meat in the freezer. But 75-yard shots are not the rule and rarely result in easy or even any meat in the freezer. They are shots that should not be taken.

We now have unfathomable technological advantages when it comes to bowhunting: GPS units, range finders, trail cameras, and bowsights that glow in dim light. Not to mention the new no-scent, lightweight, waterproof, windproof clothing that's now available.

Let's be clear. Advances in gear, archery equipment, and clothing are wonderful. They are also not the culprit. The problem is not technology but what it does to us. It can lead us to believe that, in our hurried lives, modern conveniences can replace practice and proficiency.

Just a few arrows into the hay bale in the backyard and we're good to go. No.

Perhaps an invisible line is crossed when we no longer use mechanical aids but are used by them.

More than 65 years ago, Aldo Leopold, founder of the science of wildlife management, decried the gadgeteer: "He has draped the American outdoorsman with an infinity of contraptions, all offered as aids to self-reliance, hardihood, woodcraft, or marksmanship, but too often functioning as substitutes for them."

Do you have so many gadgets that your next yard sale might compete with the local sporting goods store?

I'm no judge, as I have far more factory-made trinkets than necessary. Yet there has to be a limit, as Leopold stated, "beyond which money-bought aids to sport destroy the cultural value of sport."

Perhaps the answer to right and wrong lies in our morning mirror. After all, hunting is the one activity that has no judge, jury, referee, or umpire. Once again, Leopold said it best: "Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching—even when doing the wrong thing is legal."

The bowhunter who takes the 75-yard shot, wounds the elk or deer, then makes little attempt to find it, does so without a witness. That archer can walk away, legally, and do it all over again the next day.

Legally he is a hunter. Ethically, not so much.

Hunting is tough and should be. Somewhere lies the invisible line between too much stuff and not enough ethics.

ILLUSTRATION BY E.P. JENNE

Bruce Auchly manages the FWP regional Information and Education Program in Great Falls.

Engelmann spruce

Picea engelmannii

By Charles L. Bolin

If you happen to hike or hunt in a high-mountain area this fall, take a close look at the tallest trees near timberline. They'll likely be Engelmann spruce, stately and elegant conifers that grow throughout the Rocky Mountains.

Range and ecology

The Engelmann spruce—named for George Engelmann, a St. Louis physician and botanist—is common across mountainous regions from northern British Columbia to western Montana, west to the Cascade Range of Oregon and Washington, and south, in isolated stands, to Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, and California. Most often found above 3,000 feet, Engelmann spruce thrive where winters are cold and the growing season provides abundant moisture. At higher elevations, it tolerates drier conditions and often grows next to subalpine fir.

In Montana, the species is most common in the Purcell, Salish, Bitterroot, and Little Belt Mountains, and the Swan and Beartooth Ranges. The tall trees also grace neighborhoods in cities and towns across western and central Montana.

Its thin bark makes the Engelmann vulnerable to even low-intensity fires. At the same time, the species is more shade tolerant than many conifers. It can grow for decades under the canopy of fast-growing species such as quaking aspen, allowing it to repopulate after fires or other disturbances such as avalanches or logging.

Krummholz

Above tree line, the harsh forces of nature compress Engelmann spruce and other conifers into dwarfed trees known as krummholz (German for "crooked wood"). Krummholz provide shelter for wildlife and plants that might not otherwise survive in the windy, cold alpine environment.

Charles L. Bolin writes about western natural history from his home in Lincoln, Nebraska.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Scientific name

Picea is derived from the Latin *pix,* or *picis,* meaning "pitch." ***Engelmannii*** refers to St.Louis botanist George Engelmann.

Age

Engelmann spruce are known to live for 300 years or more. A few exceptional individuals have been aged at more than 800 years old.

Identification

From a distance, look for straight, spire-like trees taller than all others. Under ideal conditions, Engelmann spruce can grow over 160 feet tall in Montana. Up close, the trees are easily identified by the narrow, conical shape; graceful, bowed branches; and thin, reddish bark with loose scales that flake off easily. The short, bendable, dark green needles are about 1 inch long. The four-sided needles can be rolled between your fingers and emit a pungent odor when crushed. Dense clusters of 2-inch-long cones hang from the upper crown. The cones are bright red in spring, purple in summer, and tan during the rest of the year.

Roots

This spruce has a shallow root system reaching only about 2 feet into the soil. Lateral roots spread 15 to 20 feet from the base of the trunk. Because of their massive canopies combined with a weak root system, Engelmann spruce often topple in violent mountain windstorms.

Wildlife value

Like other conifers, Engelmann spruce stands are used as shelter by deer, elk, moose, bears, porcupines, chipmunks, squirrels, mice, and voles, as well as numerous songbirds such as chickadees and nuthatches. The seeds are important food for small mammals and songbirds. The trees also shade high-mountain trout streams and provide pools beneath undercut banks held secure by the roots.

Uses

For centuries, Native Americans made medicines from Engelmann spruce resin and needles to treat coughs, eczema, and respiratory complaints. They also pounded and shredded the roots to make cord and rope and used the bark for baskets and lodge roofing.

Commercially, the soft, straight-grained, odorless wood is used in timber frame construction. Select specimens are made into guitars, pianos, and violins.

Conservation status

Old stands of Engelmann spruce are susceptible to infestations by spruce bark beetles, which have grown more abundant during recent warmer, shorter winters. Pine, fir, and spruce bark beetles have ravaged forests across the western United States and Canada. In large areas of southwestern Montana, more than 50 percent of the trees have been killed by the beetles.

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PARTING SHOT

THREE AMIGOS Young mule deer bucks pause while feeding at sunset. See page 24 for more reminders of just how good we have it here in Montana during hunting season. Photo by John Lambing.

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